The God of Appetite

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The God of Appetite

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Summary

Professor William Graham of Georgetown University is travelling through Europe on behalf of Doctor Jack Crawford, who hopes to find proof of the existence of the killer who has been preying on young men and women for nearly a century. Though others would attribute the deaths to multiple killers and wild animals, Crawford insists that they are after one creature--a vampire. Will isn't sure what to believe, but with his unique gift of empathy, he's gained some insight into the mind of the killer...and what he's seen unsettles him greatly. With the help of Hannibal Lecter, a doctor in a small village near the epicentre of the attacks, Will hopes to find the responsible party.

Notes

In response to this tumblr prompt by yodalicious: old timey vampire AU with hannibal as a dracula-like character, enter Will the handsome & fascinating traveler who shows up at hannibal's door and hannibal cant bring himself to kill him. but surprise will is an undercover vampire hunter.

Only sort of...

PG for the first chapter.

- Translation into Español available: The God Of Appetite (Dios del Apetito) - Spanish Translation by Monaninna
- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: 食欲之神 by HayKer, lzskwzl

As the Angel Begins to Fall

After his travels, first by boat, then train, then carriage, and finally on foot when the paths were too treacherous for even a horse, Will was past exhausted and cold down to his very bones. He found himself in the only English speaking inn in all of northeastern Lithuania, run by an English couple. They ensconced him by the fireplace, surrounded by the savoury fragrance of garlic. The bulbs hung from the rafters and around the windows and door.

Beverly, one half of the couple who ran the inn, had pressed a glass of warmed brandywine into his hand as soon as he'd taken a seat. Then Brian, the other half, had placed a steaming bowl of rabbit stew in front of him. Now he was flushed from the wine, and drowsy from his full stomach and the day's activities.

The forest had been dense, the path overgrown with weeds and gnarling roots, and Will had fallen more than once, leaving his body bruised and sore. A warm bath seemed in order, then bed. Will had been admonished by Alana more than once about his rudeness, however, and the chambermaid did have the most enchanting smile. So he remained, answering all her questions about America, his studies, and his purpose for visiting.

"But you don't really believe in vampires, do you, Professor?" Molly asked, with a teasing grin. It made her rosy cheeks curve in the most appealing way.

"There are things I've been told, by Doctor Crawford, that defy logical, scientific explanation," Will said carefully. "And I trust him implicitly. If he says he observed and experienced these things, I believe they occurred."

"Why here, though?" Molly persisted. "Nothing like that ever happens here." Will arched a brow, lips quirked to the side, and glanced sidelong at the garlic drooping decoratively over their heads. Molly laughed outright and held up her hands in capitulation. "It's just superstition," she said. "I don't have any in *my* room."

Will was almost positive that was an invitation of some sort, and he felt his cheeks colour at the implication, eyes dropping to the floor. She was lovely, but he was not looking for any complications. He couldn't help but notice the extra weight she carried, anyway, and the way she moved as though her centre of balance had recently shifted. A new mother.

"Crosses are a more likely deterrent, anyway," he mumbled.

"I'll be sure to tell that to the *Zellers*," Molly said.

"Ah. I see your point." Will cringed at his misstep. "To answer your question as to why here, Doctor Crawford's data has shown an upswing in violent deaths in the region since the January Uprising."

At his words, something changed in Molly's open friendly expression. The smile froze on her face, and her gaze skittered to the side. Will could sense her fear and allowed the room to fall out of focus around them, the sounds dulling with the faint roar of a distant ocean wave.

There was a man--Molly's fiance--brave and kind and simple, and probably the best man she'd known. Will knew which he must be from Crawford's list: one of the more recent deaths from only a few short months ago. The body found in the river, too fresh to have been dead long. The shock of it, the stress and fear must have sent her into early labour. Will saw the lingering effects of it in how she held herself and the smile stretched just a bit too tight. More than just the normal exhaustion of caring for an infant.

"It's a hard country up here," Molly said, voice only shaking slightly. "We are still recovering from the famine, and the Russian soldiers are stricter with us so close to the border. You don't need to create some mythical creature when winter comes and the wolves are hungry. They grow bold."

"Of course," Will agreed readily. "If that is the case, then there will be nothing for me to find, and I will return to Doctor Crawford."

Molly excused herself to see to his bath. There was tension in the lines around her mouth and eyes, and she clasped at a necklace that had slipped beneath her neckline, now held tightly in her fist.

From his spot behind the bar, Brian was watching them both, arms crossed over his chest, a disapproving scowl for Will. "Don't imagine you're going to get much different a response from anyone else around these parts," he said. "It's a small town--I think we'd notice if there were some monster roaming the streets."

Will mulled over these reactions in his room, as he soaked in the steaming tub. He hadn't expected the locals to believe in vampires, necessarily, but certainly they should welcome any assistance in discovering the source behind the disappearances and deaths of their friends and loved ones.

It wouldn't be easy for him to gather the information he needed--worse than the time in Romania. He had a bit of Polish which had helped in his journey, but his Russian was miserable. For the past few months he'd been studying in every spare moment, once he'd realised Bella was far too ill for Jack to leave her side, and Will would be making this trip alone. He could read enough to get by, but he couldn't imagine that would get him very far with unfriendly natives.

Those were concerns for the morning, though. Now, with the water soothing his weary muscles and another glass of brandywine, his thoughts were starting to slow. The constant barrage of emotion and information were dulled by his exhaustion and the alcohol. When he laid his head back against the edge of the tub, his mind was blessedly empty.

Just as Will began to drift off to sleep, a shivery sensation of unease ran down his spine. There came the distinct feeling he was being watched, and he forced his leaden eyes open. Of course the room was still empty. The door shut fast and locked. On the second floor, the window looked out over the forest. The only eyes able to peer in through the frost-covered pane of glass were those of the woodland creatures who dwelled in the branches of the trees.

All the same, Will rose from the lukewarm bath and wrapped himself tightly in his bathrobe, before crossing the room and closing the heavy curtains with a perfunctory snap. The

unsettling sensation followed him, nonetheless, as he dressed for bed and brushed his teeth. Only once he was buried under the covers, spare pillow over his head, did it pass, and then he was dead to the world.

*

Morning came far too early, and Will dressed for the cold before heading downstairs for breakfast. Molly was professional but chilly towards him, and Brian all but ignored him. As Will was finishing his porridge, Beverly came by, wiping down the table from the other guests, and leaned in close enough so she wouldn't be overheard.

"Doctor Lecter is the only doctor in the area," she said. "If there's anyone who knows anything about mysterious deaths, he'd be the one. If he finds you interesting, he might even help with your research. And he speaks English."

Will spared her a rare, honest smile and breathed, "Thank you." He was incredibly useless without Jack at his side. Their information from correspondence with a Polish doctor three towns away was woefully outdated--the doctor he'd mentioned had died a decade ago, Will learned upon arriving in Šilai the day before last.

Beverly gave him her own, indulgent smirk and jerked her head towards the door. "Over the footbridge, the yellow house with the dome skylight."

The house was impossible to mistake. Down the main stretch through the village, past the handful of shops and cramped apartments, the muddy path gave way to cobblestone. It wound up with gentle slope of the hill, where the houses had some space to breathe, and ended at the wrought iron gate of the yellow house.

The gate was open, and a plaque hung from the post alongside, indicating the services provided by the doctor, *Hannibal Lecter.* Will swallowed his anxiety over explaining his situation to yet another stranger and strode up to the door, tapping the knocker firmly.

After a moment, a girl answered--maybe sixteen, with long auburn hair tied back from her face. Will made the mistake of looking into her haunted blue eyes and saw a man, her father, who adored her, who--Will tore his gaze away, but he still saw the spray of arterial red, felt it splash across his face, hot and thick. There was the scar, on her neck, just above her high, lacy collar.

She was speaking in Russian, as broken and poorly pronounced as Will's own. When he didn't immediately respond, she tried again in Polish, asking, "Do you need to see the doctor?"

Wiping at his face, as if the blood were actually there, Will shook his head and took a centring breath. "Yes. Is he available?"

"He's with a patient. Are you ill or injured?" She took him in head to toe with a searching look, and there was a suspicious glint in her eye. An immediate mistrust of him.

“No, ah…” Will fumbled around in his pocket for his card case. “I’m Professor William Graham, from Georgetown University.” He handed over one of his business cards and she took it, reading it carefully, and her suspicion only seemed to grow. She stared at him in silence, brows raised expectantly. “I’m here on a research project, and I was hoping Doctor Lecter might be able to help.”

The girl glanced over her shoulder towards a closed door. At last she stepped back and opened the door wider. “You can wait in the parlour.”

The house was as fine inside as out, with the entry way all warm woods, and the sunlight streaming in through the skylight, set in the ceiling above the open staircase. The girl led him into the parlour, decorated in the Japanese style. Vibrant blue walls, lacquered ebony furniture with clean lines and shimmering gold embellishments. A full suit of samurai armour standing between two windows.

Will made a circuit of the room, taking in the details and all the fine, delicate treasures decorating the shelves and tables. Unlike the homes in England and New York where he’d seen the style, the furniture and trinkets looked as though they’d actually come from Japan, rather than Western imitations.

“Professor Graham,” a deep voice said, and Will’s attention was drawn away from the painting over the mantle. The owner of the voice was a finely dressed man, handsome with sharp cheekbones and eyes that looked black in the shadow of the room. There was an air about him that screamed aristocracy.

“Doctor Lecter.” Will crossed the room between them to offer his hand. Doctor Lecter’s grip was strong, his skin soft and icy cold.

“I apologise,” Doctor Lecter said, in English. “I’ve just finished with a patient and had to wash up. Out here, in the winter, it takes some time for the water to run hot.”

“To have running water at all, this far out, must be a luxury,” Will said, awkward with small talk.

Doctor Lecter gave him a faintly amused look. “Please, have a seat.” He gestured to the delicate looking chairs set around a low table, and waited until Will sat before he took one himself. “Abigail tells me you’re a professor at Georgetown. What can I do for you?”

Will had made a mistake last night, letting the word *vampire* slip, tired and distracted from his long journey. It had obviously soured the mood at the inn. He would have to proceed more carefully here.

Though he’d meant what he’d said to Molly, about trusting Jack’s judgement, it was still a step too far for Will to say he believed, irrevocably, in vampires. It made far more sense that they were studying the work of a flesh and blood man, or perhaps men, working together to commit these murders.

“I’m a professor of criminal behaviour. Along with my colleague, Doctor Jack Crawford, a forensic scientist, I have been investigating a number of deaths in Romania, Bulgaria, and

here, in Lithuania, searching for a connection."

Will pulled out his journal from his valise and opened it to the correct page before passing it to Doctor Lecter. There he'd made a neat list of the names, arranged according to country and region, then by the date they'd gone missing, and, if a body had ever been recovered.

Doctor Lecter scanned the list. Here in the cold blue light from the open curtains, his eyes were a rich brown, not that odd black, and his skin looked as pale and perfect as marble. A single furrow appeared between his brow as he finished and looked up to meet Will's gaze. It was strange, but there was no sudden flood of unwelcome knowledge from the eye contact.

"A connection between deaths that occurred many years apart and in such a variety of locales would suggest a murderer capable of travelling great distance with apparent ease over a short period of time," Doctor Lecter said. "Even supposing he began in his youth, he would be an old man, now. That seems rather outlandish."

"More outlandish than the idea that dozens of murders were committed by strangers, all following the same pattern?" Will asked. "Victims primarily young men and women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five, unmarried, almost all of them without family. No one to miss them. All of them disappeared while travelling alone, generally at night."

"I suppose you could explain that away," Will said. "After all, they're easy, appealing targets. But *every single body* drained of blood, necks mutilated. No." He shook his head. "That can be no coincidence.

"It does seem unlikely," Doctor Lecter agreed.

"I've entertained the possibility that he's taken on an apprentice," Will said. "Or, that they are the crimes of a group of men--a cult perhaps."

"A cult," Doctor Lecter echoed. A distant expression took his face, and for a moment he looked as still as a statue. Then he shook his head dismissively and retrained his attention on Will. "Is that your professional opinion?"

"It's the most reasonable explanation," Will said. "Even if the original killer has trained an apprentice, the distances are still, at times, nearly insurmountable. Lex Parsimoniae, a group of killers is a far simpler explanation."

"Be that as it may, I am curious to hear your opinion, rather than an explanation of what is most likely. As a student of criminal behaviour, do *you* believe that these crimes were committed by a group of men?" Doctor Lecter asked.

There was something in his expression--challenging and probing, as though he saw right through Will's carefully erected walls to the jumbled mess of raw, conflicted emotion. It was not unlike the look Alana gave him sometimes, though devoid of pity. Instead, Doctor Lecter looked intrigued, in a detached, clinical manner.

Will closed his eyes, sifting through the various crime scene photographs he'd seen, the vibrant descriptions where photography hadn't been available. Though he tried, he found he

could not entirely discount Jack's account of creatures who hid from the sunlight and hunted at night; who were invulnerable to bullets and blades, even to the ravages of time, their only weaknesses the sunlight, fire, and stake to the heart; demons who fed on the blood of humans for sustenance.

When he slipped into the skin of this killer--for it was just the one--it was not unlike what Will imagined it might be to plunge into the frigid depths of a frozen lake. Bottomless, cold, still, and devoid of life.

Will was walking through the forest, and though there was a blanket of orange and red leaves under foot, his footsteps were without sound. A young man made his way along the path in the distance.

Even in the dark, Will could see and hear him quite clearly--not the details of the clothing he wore or the tune he whistled. No, he saw the way his breath disturbed the air around him and the rippling effect of each exhale. Heard the rush of blood in his veins, heart beating fast from exertion. His body heat was a visible distortion of glimmering light, rising from his skin and dispersing into the cool night air.

With barely more than a rustle of fabric and the blink of an eye, Will was on the path in front of the man. There was a momentary flash of fear, but then Will stepped closer and held out a hand and man came to him without hesitation, allowed himself to be pulled in.

Every time he allowed himself to mirror the killer's mind, this is what he saw. The circumstances and setting changed slightly, but the method was always the same. And, as always, when he tried to disengage, even as he felt coppery hot blood spill in his mouth, Will felt trapped, as though the ice had closed over his head and he was drowning in the killer's mind.

"This man is calculated and remorseless. For the most part, his victims don't suffer. It's not out of kindness. The killer finds it more dignified to keep them calm until the very end," Will said. "He finds his work necessary, and he sees no compelling reason why he shouldn't kill--his victims aren't human to him. Or...no. They *are* human. He's the one who isn't. He thinks of himself as a god."

"Fascinating, if unorthodox methodology, Professor Graham," Lecter said, when Will opened his eyes. Will flushed, rubbing his hands on his trousers and averting his gaze. "It was as though you went somewhere else entirely."

Will shrugged, then remembered his manners. He needed the doctor's help, after all. "I've spent many years getting inside the heads of the most violent offenders America has to offer," he said. "After a time, it becomes rather mundane."

"As you say," Doctor Lecter allowed, with a gracious dip of his head. His every gesture was precise--it was almost hypnotic to watch. "I must admit, I am at a loss as to how I might help someone of your obvious skill."

"From the list, you can see a disproportionate number of the victims from the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania disappeared in the woods between here, Antašava, and Palėvenė. Doctor

Crawford has spent a decade correlating data and investigating sightings. If there is one man, it is likely he makes this region his base of operations. I was hoping to find some more detailed records of any mysterious deaths, which might allow us to further narrow down his location."

"To what end?" Doctor Lecter asked. "If this is one man, then surely he is nearing death himself. Unless…" the doctor arched one fine brow, the tip of his tongue pressing against his upper lip.

"Unless," Will repeated grimly, "he's immortal."

Doctor Lecter grinned, a quick, sharp flash of teeth. "So Abigail was correct," he said. "Though you've been in town less than twenty-four hours, the rumour mill is hard at work, Professor. Brian Zeller says you're after a vampire."

Will didn't bother refuting it. He braced himself for the censure sure to follow, though it never came. Doctor Lecter looked amused. Unbidden, Will saw the how the days passed here, interminably. Though he had money enough to travel, estates throughout Europe, Doctor Lecter settled here out of some sense of mingled nostalgia and obligation.

"Doctor Crawford has unearthed some very convincing evidence," Will said.

"I think there's more to it than that," Doctor Lecter said. "A reasonable man would not travel the world hunting down a supernatural killer on the word of a colleague, alone." He crossed his legs and leaned to the side, chin propped in his palm.

"Supernatural or man, he's still killing innocent people, Doctor Lecter."

"Hannibal," he said, the name lyrical and mesmerising with his accent. "If you please. And might I call you William?"

It was rather sudden to offer. "I prefer Will."

Doctor Lecter smiled again, a lazy, satisfied curl to his lips. "Will." The way he said it made it sound like a pet name, intimate and warm. Will shifted in his seat, discomfited. "May I ask what it is you saw, when you closed your eyes before?"

Will shivered. It wasn't even that the doctor was particularly forward. Among his colleagues, social etiquette was decidedly more relaxed than in general. Price had no idea of boundaries, and Alana's concern often crossed a line into what others might consider inappropriate. Obviously, the fact that Will was here, alone, not entirely willingly, spoke to how Jack regularly imposed on him beyond what should be expected of another in his position.

No, this was something different altogether, that settled heavy in Will's gut, leaving his skin feeling prickly and overheated. "The things I see, most people would find disturbing."

Doctor Lecter looked him in the eye, and Will found it difficult to look away. "As a doctor, I can assure you, there is very little that disturbs me."

“I didn’t mean--it’s not the violence,” Will said. He so often avoid discussing his ability, it was difficult to put into words, now. “It’s how it makes me--” He stopped abruptly and cleared his throat. “This is not something I wish to discuss.”

“Oh, but I would like very much to hear more,” Doctor Lecter said. His voice was quiet and oddly thrilling. Will shot him a glare and was about to say he didn’t particularly care. Manners be damned--Doctor Lecter was hardly deserving of them with this behaviour. Only then Lecter went on, “I’d be glad to help you with your research, if you will only indulge me in this, please.”

Will considered going home to Jack empty-handed. But there was so much on Jack’s shoulders already, with Bella wasting away. If only Will could help in some small way. Give him some measure of peace. If only Will could discover the truth behind this vampire once and for all. Answering Doctor Lecter’s question was such a small price to pay.

“When I said that I’d been inside the heads of criminals, what I meant is that I am able to think their thoughts, feel their emotions,” Will explained. He chanced a hesitant look at Doctor Lecter to gauge his reaction. The doctor’s attention was rapt. “It’s a useful skill that the university regularly lends to the police.”

“And what did you feel, inside this killer’s mind?” Lecter asked.

Will wished he had to dig deeper to draw on those thoughts, but the truth was they lie close to the surface, constantly pushing against the boundaries of restraint, threatening to break free.

“I felt ancient and powerful,” he said, haltingly. “I could see the threads of my victims’ mortality, cut short by my doing, and it was...fitting. The proper order of things. When I--When I bit them, it was--satisfying. Primitively so. It was nothing like the other killers I’ve seen. This--this is an apex predator, sure in his position of supremacy and it felt...” Will swallowed hard and made himself spit out the word, “sublime.”

“Are you disturbed by these feelings?” Doctor Lecter asked, leaning back in his seat, hands clasped. “Or your reaction to them?”

“Doctor Lecter--”

“Hannibal.”

“*Doctor Lecter*,” Will said, fighting the urge to grit his teeth, and losing. “We had a deal. I answered your question.”

“Indeed,” Doctor Lecter said. “Quid pro quo.” He rose elegantly to his feet. “Come with me; I’ll help you find your vampire.”

And the Devils Begin to Rise

Chapter Notes

Okay, I lied, guess it's three parts!

Doctor Lecter took Will to his study, a room that rose two stories with bookshelves lining one wall floor to ceiling. Though the sun shone through the window spanning both stories, and a fire crackled merrily in the fireplace, the room still felt oppressively dark--rich mahogany and deep cherry wood, ornately patterned rugs in hues of indigo, Prussian blue, and merlot, forest green walls, and dark upholstery. Will should have found it uncomfortable, but on the contrary, it was a pleasant retreat.

The records Doctor Lecter kept were quite extensive, as were those of the previous doctor, and the one before, all of which Lecter had kept. Jack would be ecstatic to get his hands on these. Doctor Lecter brought down journal after journal, as well as a few volumes on local folklore.

They poured over the records for the majority of the day. Will barely paused, even when Abigail came in with a tray of tea and sandwiches in the afternoon. When Lecter set aside his own volume, Will made himself do the same. He grabbed one of the delicate sandwiches and took a hasty, overly large bite.

“It is interesting that you would make the leap straight to vampire,” Doctor Lecter said. “There is a great deal of pagan folklore from this area, tales of great wolves with jaws that can tear through iron. Creatures who look and behave like humans in the daylight, and feed on their flesh at night. If we are to believe that the culprit is supernatural in nature, are we to automatically assume vampire?”

Will washed down his mouthful with a swallow of tea. “Who’s to say that the creature of which you speak and the vampire are not one and the same? There are endless variations on the vampire mythology, from region to region. Some cannot walk upon hallowed ground, while others may wander where they please. Some have barbed tongues, others sharp, fang like teeth. There are versions in the south, of vampires who can change shape at will.”

Doctor Lecter appeared supremely amused by all of this, and Will hardly blamed him. He could still recall his own reaction, when Jack first told him of the research he was doing.

“You must have narrowed your parameters, in your studies,” Doctor Lecter said. “Tell me about this vampire you are hunting. Can he change shape?”

Will frowned, uncertain if he was being taunted or not. “No,” he said curtly. “If such a thing as a vampire exists, I do not think he possesses any shapeshifting abilities. His only powers,

so to speak, are his relative immortality and a preternatural speed. I would posit that the disadvantages of his condition far outweigh any benefits."

"Why is that?" Doctor Lecter tilted his head to the side, eyes narrowed in interest. He reminded Will, oddly, of a bird of prey.

"Well, he only hunts at night. Considering that, along with the fact that one of the few nearly universal conditions of vampirism is photophobia, we can assume the vampire cannot move about in daylight. That puts him at a severe disadvantage--once we know his location, he will be entirely vulnerable to us during the day."

"That is only one disadvantage," Doctor Lecter said.

Will took another bite of his sandwich and took his time chewing, letting the doctor wait for his answer. He was mildly annoyed by all the questions, when all he wanted was to get the information he needed. Once he swallowed, he answered, "His need for blood, his fear of silver and crosses, not to mention the fact that his immortality would make it impossible for him to stay in any one place for long lest he draw attention to himself. Altogether a suspicious individual, to be sure, even if one does not believe in vampires."

"I had wondered," Doctor Lecter murmured and leaned across the table. When he reached out, Will was so shocked by his boldness that all he could do was flinch, as Doctor Lecter plucked at the cross around his neck. He hooked a finger in the chain and let the cross fall into his palm, regarding it closely. "I had not pegged you for a religious man."

Sweat prickled at the back of Will's neck and he cleared his throat. Wrapping his hand around the chain, he gave a little tug and Doctor Lecter let go easily, sitting back in his chair. "Doctor Crawford insists," he said.

"I should hope," Doctor Lecter said. A small, teasing smile toyed at his lips. "It wouldn't do to send you out in the field without some measure of protection."

Will sat up straighter, tucking the chain inside the collar of his shirt. "I can take care of myself," he muttered.

"I was not questioning your competence," Doctor Lecter assured him, tone mild. "You seem to know this killer quite intimately. Certainly your assessment of his abilities and your preparedness for them are unimpeachable."

On the surface it sounded complimentary, and there was nothing in Lecter's tone or facial expression to suggest otherwise. Nonetheless, Will had the distinct impression he was being made fun of.

After lunch, Will continued pouring over the books until night fell. Doctor Lecter left to see to his patients, extending permission for Will to use whatever books he needed. It was nearly seven in the evening when Doctor Lecter came in again.

"I must apologise," Doctor Lecter said. "I would like to have you for dinner, but an emergency has come up the next town over and I am needed. Perhaps tomorrow evening?"

Will removed his glasses, tossing them on top of his journal, and rubbed at his sore eyes. “You needn’t do that,” he protested.

“It is no trouble, I assure you. I hope I don’t sound too much a braggart when I say that as lovely as I’m certain Mrs. Zeller’s cooking is, I think you’ll find my own far superior.”

“You do your own cooking?” Will asked, brow arched in amusement. “Well, if those sandwiches are any indication of your skill, I suppose you’re right. Far less garlicy, for one thing.”

Doctor Lecter laughed, and Will was transfixed by the sight. He couldn’t say why, but it seemed as though such an expression was out of place on Lecter’s face. His was an old-fashioned face, like something straight from a painting centuries past. “I would imagine that, in moderation, garlic would still deter your vampire,” he said, with a twinkle in his eye.

“I’m willing to risk it,” Will said. “Dinner sounds lovely.” Then, he added, with a hesitant, sidelong look, “I could use another day or two with your books, as well.”

“Of course,” Doctor Lecter said. “As long as you need. And when you have finished tomorrow evening, we will dine together. Now, I really must run. Abigail will see you out.” And with that, Doctor Lecter was gone.

*

Will slept uneasily that evening. As he undressed, he found he had that same unsettled sensation that he was being watched as he’d had the night before. Someone had pinned back the curtains during the day, and he closed them tightly again. As an extra precaution, he unpacked the crosses he’d brought with him, tying them to the sashes.

Nightmares were not unusual for Will. He’d suffered night terrors in his youth, episodes of uncontrollable panicky tears which his father tried desperately and hopelessly to console. Those faded in his teenage years, to be replaced with the all too real images he gleaned from minds of people in the streets. Mundane, but altogether horrifying--rape, abuse, casual cruelty that haunted his waking hours and followed him into sleep.

Of course, none of that compared to what became of his dreams once he started working with the police. Nothing that had come before could have prepared him for what he saw when he occupied the minds of the worst criminals America had to offer. His nightmares weren’t mere echoes of the things he saw. In his sleep, he became those criminals. And worse, he liked it.

This evening was different. He dreamed of twisting, dark corridors made of crumbling stone and lit only by flickering candles. Someone was with him, though how he knew, he could not say. There was no sign of this other inhabitant--no footsteps, or susurrations of cloth, not even the faintest sound of the inhalation or exhalation of breath. He never saw any footprints, no disruption of the dirt floor, no passing shadow. But he was not alone.

For hours, he walked the labyrinthine path, but even as his strength flagged, as he grew parched and weary, the thing behind him came closer still. Will knew that to allow it to catch up with him would spell his doom, and so he continued onward. Never even pausing to rest.

At last, the corridor opened into a cavernous room, so suddenly that Will stumbled in surprise. The room was empty, save for a great stone plinth in the centre, surrounded by glowing pillars. Atop the plinth was a coffin. He couldn't say why, but Will was disappointed by the sight of it--plain, unadorned pine and nails. No carvings or embellishments. When he pushed aside the lid, there was no satin lining--no lining at all. He'd expected something different. Something grand.

And then, a cool gust of air stirred the hair at the back of his neck, and Will froze in terror. He couldn't move--couldn't even breathe. "It isn't for me," the voice whispered, and a hand pressed against his back, burning cold even through layers of clothing. "Go on. Climb inside. Let's see how you fit."

Will woke in a cold sweat, tangled in the sheets. Daylight was peeking in around the edges of the curtains. Though it wasn't the dark, depraved torture to which he'd grown accustomed, neither would he make the mistake of saying it wasn't a nightmare.

It filled him with cold disquiet that followed throughout the morning. He was exhausted as he freshened up and dressed, feet dragging as he headed downstairs for breakfast. It was as though he'd actually been walking all night, and the idea of going any further, even only as far as the downstairs, seemed an insurmountable challenge.

After breakfast, he penned a letter to Jack with the information he'd gathered so far. Thanks to the meticulous note-keeping of the doctors, he'd been able to not only confirm the data they'd gathered, but found further evidence of further incidences. More than ever, Will was certain this was the right place.

When he stepped outside, it was to find that snow had fallen overnight. The morning sunlight reflected on the glittering white and Will hissed, hiding his face in the collar of his winter coat. There was a great deal of commotion--shouting and people running through the street. Given the size of the town, it had to be something big.

Will followed the path of heavily trodden, muddy slush in the same general direction as Doctor Lecter's house. It split off before the hill, leading across yet another footbridge towards the stables. A crowd had gathered outside, held off by a constable and two members of the Imperial Russian Army, but Will couldn't understand the jumbled, frantic words being spoken. He pushed through the crowd, hearing the murmurs about the vampire hunter.

"What's happened here?" he asked, corralling enough Russian for that, at least.

His only response was a sneer from one of the army men. Will stood on his toes, straining to catch a glimpse beyond, and his eye caught on a familiar face. "Doctor Lecter," he called out, waving a hand as the man turned more fully.

Doctor Lecter came over, spoke in cool, clipped tones to the men at the stable door, and then Will was being ushered inside before they fell in again behind. "What's going on?" Will asked.

"Žiburinis," Doctor Lecter said, and ignored the sharp reprimand that came from one of the soldiers. Doctor Lecter placed his hand on Will's back, leading him further into the stable. "It

is what the locals call him. The soldiers disapprove of any use of our mother tongue."

"Who is *he*?" Will asked.

Rather than answer, Doctor Lecter led him to the last stall, and Will turned to see for himself. There was a woman, maybe in her late twenties, completely naked save the narrow blanket and saddle over her back. Her hair had been brushed till it shone, plaited in a series of braids that were draped artfully over her neck. She'd been propped up on all fours, like an animal, and bridled. And, perhaps most horrifying of all, horseshoes had been tacked to her hands and feet. The amount of blood suggested it had been done while she was still alive.

"There are no signs of struggle, no marks upon her body save those of the nails. Until I can perform a more thorough examination, I can only assume she died of heart failure," Doctor Lecter said. "The locals are blaming Žiburinis, a skeletal, forest dwelling spirit."

Will barely heard him. It was automatic at this point, the swinging of the pendulum , unwinding time, watching the scene deconstruct.

The girl thinks she's meeting a lover in the forest. She smiles as Will approaches, crooking a finger to beckon him closer. He wraps a hand around her throat and she doesn't fight when he pushes her back to the tree and kisses her and his teeth pierce her tongue. Blood wells up between their mouths and when they part, her eyes are glazed over.

She stands still and blank-faced as he slips the bridle over her face, allows him to lead her to the stables. He tends to her gently, almost lovingly, combing and braiding her hair, brushing her skin, placing the saddle. Those blue eyes barely flinch as she is shod.

Then she runs. She runs for hours through the night, galloping on all fours, never flagging, as though she is being chased by the devil himself. And, Will thinks, as he follows along, gliding in the trees above her, she is.

"Will?"

Will blinked, and Doctor Lecter stood before him. They'd moved--Will was standing by the back door, overlooking the path that led directly into the woods. His mind was racing. "We always assumed the killer we were looking for had one, clear cut modus operandi."

"You think this is the work of your vampire?"

"I'm sure of it," Will said. "This is from folklore--the man who discovers the young woman he is meant to marry is a vampire. He bridles her and rides her through the night, until she drops dead from exhaustion. Though he's given himself away with this."

"Oh?" Doctor Lecter asked, intrigued.

"By now it's gotten around town why I'm here, and the vampire has heard. This was a message for me, but he made a mistake. There's only so far word can have travelled. It narrows my search radius by quite a bit."

"Maybe," Doctor Lecter said carefully, "that was his intention."

Will gave him a sharp, questioning look. “You think he’s taunting me?”

“Or,” Doctor Lecter said, “perhaps he is issuing a challenge.”

Will considered it, mind wandering with the possibilities. “I’m going to have to start all over again with your books,” he said at last. “This changes everything. If he’s killed like this before, it might provide more clues as to his identity.”

“If this vampire has taken a personal interest in you, you might not have to discover his location after all,” Doctor Lecter said. “He might come to you.”

In retrospect, Will would come to realise there had been quite a few indications as to his fate that he simply hadn’t seen.

*

After a very frustrating day of pouring through medical records again, this time searching for any unusual details, regardless of the cause of death, or the social status of the victim, Will's head was pounding. There was far too much data, without any way of further narrowing it down, and when the clock chimed seven times, Doctor Lecter came to pull him away from the study.

True to his word, Doctor Lecter was an excellent chef. Abigail brought them dish after dish--creamy tomato soup with fennel and toasted muenster, followed by roast hare rubbed in sweet herbs and wrapped in bacon, served with red currant jelly, over sautéd mushrooms and special potatoes. All the while, Lecter himself kept Will’s glass full of a rich, heady red wine.

“Abigail,” Will said, once she’d delivered their plates and left the room. He rubbed his own neck in the place of her scar. “Her…father?”

Doctor Lecter peered at him, poised to take a bite of his food, and set his fork back down. “Yes,” he said. “I was in Brandenburg at the time. Garrett Jacob Hobbs was a sick man, delusional. He’d been having hallucinations that would lead him to attack strangers in the street. I was called in to assess the situation, and when I arrived I found he’d already attacked his family. I managed to save Abigail, though his wife was beyond what help I could provide.”

“It was very kind of you to take her in,” Will said, allowing the implication to fall between them.

Lecter smiled, and his expression was that of a man far away, lost in thought. “She reminded me of my sister,” he said.

“Oh.” Will stared at his plate, put in his place. “I didn’t--”

“It’s quite alright,” Lecter assured him. “You are not the first to make such an assumption, and I doubt you’ll be the last. I saw in Abigail a great potential, and I was not about to let that be cut short. A girl of her age, orphaned, would have few options available to her, and so I took her under my wing.”

“I’m sorry,” Will said. “That was rude.”

“Something tells me you don’t much care for social niceties,” Doctor Lecter said.

Will shrugged, then laughed. “Yes, well...it’s difficult to care about much under the constant onslaught of everyone else’s thoughts and emotions. I expend a great deal of energy trying to ignore it all.”

“Understandable,” Doctor Lecter said. “Have you looked into methods for reining in your ability? A barrier, if you will, between yourself and the outside world.”

“You make it sound like I’m a mind-reader,” Will said. Maybe it was the wine, or the delicious food, but he was starting to feel relaxed and comfortable, at ease. It certainly helped that Lecter was a simple, unobtrusive mind. No endless barrage of thoughts pressing in on him.

Doctor Lecter gave him an easy smile. It softened his features in an unexpected way. “No, Will, there’s nothing supernatural about you.”

Abigail cleared their plates, and Doctor Lecter saw Will into the study before going to prepare dessert. A voice in his mind that sounded suspiciously like Jack Crawford was pointing out that he could use the opportunity to continue with his research...but the chairs here were much larger and more comfortable than those in the parlour, and arranged close to the fire.

Will took a seat, staring at the flickering flames, and found himself on the verge of sleep when Lecter returned. He brought with him a tray of strong, fragrant coffee, and dark, rich pudding served in an orange rind and decorated in raspberries. Will moaned at the first bite.

“This is decadent, Hannibal.” It was simple curiosity, and nothing more, that made Will use his name, watching the effect it had on the man. The wrinkling of pleasure around the corners of his eyes. He radiated a smug satisfaction.

“A favourite recipe of mine,” Lecter said. “I rarely have the opportunity to cook for anyone other than Abigail and myself.”

“That’s a shame,” Will said. “It was all so delicious. I don’t know the last time I’ve eaten so well--I’m about to fall asleep in my pudding.”

Lecter nudged his coffee closer, but even after finishing the cup, Will felt drowsy and disoriented. “I should get back to the inn.”

“Allow me to walk with you,” Lecter said.

Will stood, opened his mouth to protest, and stumbled slightly, catching himself on the back of the chair. Lecter’s tone brooked no argument when he said, “There is a killer on the loose, Will, I can’t let you walk alone in your condition.”

“Then you’d be alone walking home,” Will protested. He shoved his hand into his eye socket, trying to quell the sudden pounding. He swayed, and Lecter caught him, grip almost bruising

on Will’s elbow.

“I assure you, I can take care of myself,” Lecter said. He looked supremely amused. “However, if you are concerned, you can stay here this evening. There is plenty of room.”

“No,” Will said. “I--I couldn’t, I don’t--”

“Will.” Lecter’s tone was firm, and his hand was suddenly on Will’s face. “I’m afraid I must insist.”

Lecter walked him back to the inn with a steadying arm around his back. Though he was unsteady on his feet, all of Will's senses were heightened. He could hear the slow trickle of the stream, each gust of wind picking through the leaves and branches, and felt it ripple through the individual strands of his hair, saw the moonlight refracting in a rainbow of light over the snow. It had a smell, and how had he never noticed that before? Something clean and chemical.

At the door, Lecter looked around with a clear measure of distaste. “Will you be alright from here?” he asked.

Will glanced up at the garlic hanging overhead. “The décor certainly leaves something to be desired,” he said. “Thank you for walking me back.”

Lecter took Will’s hand in both of his, and for a moment of breathless disbelief, Will thought he was going to press a kiss to it. But he just held it for a moment, staring Will in the eye as if searching for something. Whatever it was, he found it, and nodded once. “Sleep well, Will.”

Even after Lecter had gone and Will was in his room, he felt the touch, and the weight of Hannibal’s eyes on his own.

*

The morning came far too soon. Once again, Will had dreamed of the maze of corridors. This time, as he wandered, the walls changed from crumbling stone to woodgrain, and eventually to thickly packed trees. The branches arched overhead, as densely woven as cloth, blocking out the sky.

It took longer for him to tire, but he was still being pursued. More than once he tried to squeeze his way between the trees. The thin slivers of light peeking through beckoned him into the sunlight and safety, but there was never enough space to make it.

His pursuer was relentless as before. Before long Will was running, tripping over the gnarled roots beneath his feet and scrambling along. Once again, he came upon an giant, open space, where the trees formed a clearing, stretching upwards and opening to let the moonshine in, cast over the plinth. When the sun had set, Will couldn’t say.

He slowed as he reached the steps and climbed up to the coffin. Roots had wound their way up the stone and over the sides of the pine, leaves and curling ivy covered the exterior, and plush, verdant moss coated the insides.

Will touched hesitantly--he was struck with the strangest compulsion to climb inside. To feel the moss against his bare skin. There were a million colours in it--from bright, vibrant yellow-green chartreuse to shamrock to deep forest green, and it was alive, responding to his touch, rising to meet his palm. Soft as velvet, and headily-scented of soil.

So overtaken by the coffin and it's contents as Will was, he forgot altogether about his pursuer, until, once again, there was a hand on his back. The fingers were points of ice along his spine. When Will shivered, it wasn't from the cold.

A nose dragged up the curve of Will's neck, drawing a purposeful, unnecessary breath. The exhale brushed along his jaw like a caress, followed by the actual caress of a hand, tilting his head to the side, exposing the taut stretch of his neck.

Will was on the verge of hyperventilating, dragging in gulping breaths, fists clenching in the moss, grabbing handfuls. The mouth was soft and dry, barely ghosting across the vulnerable throb of his pulse. He was aware of his arousal as a distant but incessant ache, but all of his focus was on that mouth, lips parting, the lush press of a tongue against his skin and the slightest suction, before two, sharp points set against him, ready to bite.

And then, he'd woken, desperately hard, hips working frantically into the mattress. Will kicked off the sheets and hiked up his sleep robe enough to get a hand inside his shorts. He almost wept with relief at the touch of his hand on his erection, but it was all wrong. His hand was too warm, damp with sweat. It was that cold grip he longed for. How unfair to have been ripped from his dream, right before the moment of completion.

How he longed for that piercing sensation of being split open and filled. The thought of that connection, of being known in such an intimate way, drove him over the edge, spilling all over his hand. He muffled his groan in his pillow, hips driving into his fist over and over, the pleasure drawing out quite a bit longer than he was used to.

After, lying there, catching his breath, semen drying on his hand, Will had to reevaluate his own thoughts. What he felt in a dream he could excuse or dismiss. Will had years of experiencing dreaming of himself doing horrible things and enjoying them as practice.

No, it was the lack of immediate revulsion on waking, the lingering sensation of delectation. Will was not a particularly sexual creature, and he certainly had never has desire to be penetrated, in any sense of the word.

In all his time working with Jack, all the research he'd done, he'd never found the creature they hunted attractive. There was nothing romantic about any of this, and he was thoroughly ashamed of himself. Thank God Jack wasn't along this time. Will was uncertain he could face him after indulging in this fantasy.

Set Their Sights Upon Their Prey

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sun was far too bright. Will's head was splitting--there was too much stimulus for him to process it all. Every leaf still clinging to the trees cut through with veins, each grain of bark, the way fabric fell and shifted and draped as the townspeople went about their daily business, the water bubbling up through the ice in the stream catching gold and white and blue.

Will ducked between buildings, into the shade of the awning of the general store. Leaning against the wall, he closed his eyes, fingers digging into his temples. Hangovers weren't unusual for him, but this was a bit extreme. Then again, his drink of choice was usually liquor, not that rich, vaguely fruity wine Hannibal served.

Upon seeing his face, after Abigail showed Will into the study, Hannibal disappeared into the kitchen and came back with a cup of coffee. After the first swallow, Will felt a bit better. By the time he finished the first cup, the headache had all but subsided.

Now, after seeing their vampire's work with the young girl in the stables, Will was forced to reevaluate everything. Yesterday he'd been overwhelmed by the amount of new data and too shaken up over what he'd seen when he'd gone inside the head of her killer. The idea that the killer was now aware of him, and sending a message.

Today, Will set out some guidelines for narrowing down the massive list. Unfortunately not a lot of the records went into detail on how the bodies were found, if there were any strange details in the room or on the bodies--mostly they focussed only on the cause of death and any wounds contributing to that.

Part of Will's ability to mirror and his extensive memory allowed him to extrapolate from what was written there and reconstruct what had happened from the details. Most of the deaths were straight-forward and mundane. A great deal of them were the result of illness, pneumonia or influenza, infections arising from surgery or giving birth. Heart attacks and strokes, and the occasional consumptive disease.

There were a handful of murders, and then another, small handful of the unexplained, most of these represented in Jack's original research. Some were strange, even by Will's standards, developed over years of reading Jack's accounts, and visiting more than his fair share of grisly crime scenes.

The young woman dead of apparent exposure in the middle of July, found draped over her lover's grave, surrounded by a wreath of woven pink and red roses. A priest who had miraculously survived a fall from the spire of the cathedral only to be found dead a few days later, the only wound upon him a bite mark on the fourth finger of his left hand. The lord found sitting in the town square, half covered in snow, posed in a posture of supplication, hands raised above his head, his own heart resting in the cradle of them.

These records spanned several decades and over a hundred miles, and some were truly baffling. When Doctor Lecter had finished his last appointment for the day, a pregnant lady nearing her travail, Will had a list of such occurrences during his tenure after which to inquire.

“Hannibal,” he called out, “do you recall the case with Mrs. Norkus?” Will hadn’t really made a conscious decision to address Hannibal by his first name, it had simply happened. He didn’t miss the look of victorious pleasure in the Hannibal’s eyes, followed by the briefest flash of disgust at the woman’s name, which he quickly suppressed. Given the man’s general mild demeanour, Will was intrigued.

“Mrs. Norkus,” Hannibal repeated, coming into the room to pick up the journal spread open before Will. “Her three children had drowned the week before. Though the father was distraught, Mrs. Norkus remained stoic and unmoved throughout the recovery of their bodies, and their burial. Many wondered if she might have had something to do with their deaths.”

Sadly, it wasn’t a shocking notion for Will. He’d seen mothers do dreadful things to their children. He could see it had affected Hannibal quite deeply, though he hid it well. Will couldn’t help but recall the mention of Hannibal’s sister--though nothing he’d said had indicated as much, Will nonetheless knew that sister was no longer alive. Something about this woman worried at that old ache.

Hannibal placed the book back on the table and sniffed with apparent disinterest. “Mrs. Norkus had two deep wounds, one on each side of her abdomen, and was suspended above above the disinterred corpses of her children, so that they were bathed in her blood. There was never much of an investigation--it was the general consensus of all involved that justice had already been done.”

“There is an account from the 2nd century," Will said. "A mother kills her own young in a burst of rage. Then, in her grief, she strikes herself in the side and bleeds over them, bringing them back to life. This sort of blood folklore was, at the time, part of the ecclesiastical tradition. The motif of metaphorical death and rebirth through Christ’s blood.”

“You’re suggesting this was your vampire? That he was attempting to make these children whole again?” Hannibal went to stand by the hearth, hands clasped behind his back, face turned towards the fire. His tone was indecipherable. “That hardly sounds like the vicious killer you’ve described.”

“It is intriguing,” Will agreed. “If it was the vampire, it changes my initial profile of him. The sort of people who commit multiple murders like this, over a long period of time, generally exhibit the same behaviours. Someone capable of such indiscriminate violence, who sees his victims as inhuman, is someone unable to form emotional attachment or feel empathy.”

“Ah, but you are attempting to attribute human behaviour to a creature you believe to be other than human.” Hannibal glanced over his shoulder, face caught in the light of the flickering fire, and for a brief moment, Will had the absurd notion that *Hannibal* looked inhuman. “If you are to accept that this creature you hunt defies the rules of nature and physics, how can you hope to understand his motivations in terms of what motivates man?”

“I suppose you’re right.” Will shook his head, clearing away the strange feeling that had settled over him, watching the play of shadows on Hannibal’s face. “If that is the case, I don’t know what I’m even doing here.” He slammed the journal shut in frustration. “It’s quite possible I’ve been wrong about everything.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” Hannibal said. “I would wager that what you’ve discerned from detailed accounts of his crime scenes is quite accurate. Yet as impressive as your skills are, you can’t expect to glean the same level of understanding from medical records--especially ones with little to no description of how or where the death occurred.”

Will’s shoulders slumped in defeat and Hannibal went on, “Forgive me if I’m being presumptuous, but it seems as though you are more interested in understanding your vampire’s motivations than actually apprehending him.”

“I--” Will was caught off-guard. “Well...yes, I do want to understand him,” he stuttered. “But that doesn’t mean--of *course* I want to apprehend him. He’s killed dozens of innocent people--quite likely more than Jack and I even fathomed. He needs to be stopped. I need to stop him.”

Hannibal chose not to comment on that. He came over to the table, easing the journal out from under Will’s hand, and placed it on top of the stack. “You have been working yourself to exhaustion the past few days, bent over these journals for hours on end. You should allow your eyes and mind to rest and recuperate.”

Will lifted his gaze to Hannibal’s and gave him a wry smirk. “Is that your medical opinion?”

Once again, Will was struck by the way Hannibal’s smile changed his whole face, made him seem warmer. “Doctor’s orders,” he said. The teasing lilt to his voice made Will’s cheeks heat inexplicably. “Would you like to stay again for dinner?”

“I don’t want to impose--” Will said. “You’ve already been so tolerant of my presence, Doctor Lecter.”

“Hannibal, please. And I assure you, it is not mere tolerance. Your work is fascinating and your company is most welcome.”

“In that case…” Will ducked his eyes, shy under Hannibal’s gaze. “The cooking, and the company, are far superior in your home.”

Lecter’s kitchen was as impeccably tidy as the rest of his home, with all the modern amenities. This was an altogether surreal experience. Will couldn’t recall the last time he’d been in a kitchen, outside of any investigations of murders that took place in one. His room in the professor’s dormitory hall had a small stove, but he took the majority of his meals in the dining hall or at restaurants.

Those evenings when Will was invited to dine at the homes of his friends and colleagues were acts of charity on their part, couched as requests for his company. Will had never bothered to point out that no one in their right mind would seek out more of his company.

And yet, here was Hannibal, with no need to be charitable, no reason to extend any kindness beyond what he had already shown in allowing Will use of his records and home. Allowing Will into this private, domestic sphere.

Strange enough that Hannibal cooked for himself, but that could be dismissed as an eccentricity of wealth. Even so, one's guests were not invited into one's kitchen. It was unseemly...and private. Hannibal discarded his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves, before tying a plain white apron around his waist, and Will averted his gaze, as if seeing something obscene.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Offering seemed inappropriate somehow, but then again, not offering might be considered rude. Will had no inkling of what the proper etiquette was when someone was cooking you dinner.

"Relax, please," Hannibal said, ushering Will to the long wooden table. "Perhaps after dinner I can play you something on the piano. Abigail has a lovely voice."

"That sounds nice." Will wasn't only saying it to be polite. He had no musical inclination himself, but he loved to listen. The only part he truly enjoyed about dinner engagements was the opportunity for music, after. With all the late hours with Jack before he left, and the travelling since, it had been awhile.

"For now, a drink." Hannibal fixed Will a glass of port and tonic garnished with a slice of orange and sat it before him. Will knew the man had to be wealthy, from all the fine things he owned, and how he dressed, but this seemed like a particularly ostentatious show of it. Imported oranges, in the middle of winter.

Hannibal first made up a pie crust and Will found himself staring at the man's long, fine fingers, covered in flour and butter, kneading the dough just until it came together, then lifting it deftly and draping it in a thin layer over the baking dish. Will had never considered that watching someone cook could be so interesting.

Catching Will's intent expression, Hannibal broke the silence between them. "I've learned so much about your work, Will, but very little about you personally," he commented, as he poured in the premixed filling--steak and vegetables in a thick, red sauce--and laid the second crust over top.

Will snorted and took a sip from his drink. It was nice, a blend he'd never had before, and though it was cold, it warmed him on the way down. "There is very little that is interesting about me, personally. You've seen the most interesting parts already."

Hannibal paused in pressing the edges of the crust into a neat, rippled pattern, and raised his head to arch a brow at Will. "I find that difficult to believe." There was a heat in his eyes and Will felt it like a hand to his cheek. He shifted in his seat and averted his gaze, covering for it by taking another long drink.

"Well, I don't know." Will shrugged in discomfort. He was used to giving lectures, or talking with his colleagues about their work. "Probably nothing I could say would be appropriate dinner conversation. Not very appetising."

“There is very little that can put off my appetite,” Hannibal said.

“I don’t know anything about you, either,” Will pointed out, in a desperate attempt to steer the conversation away from himself.

Hannibal put the pie in the oven and closed the door, then checked on a simmering pot on the stove top. When he lifted the lid, Will could smell the rich, creamy scent of roasted marrow squash and a variety of herbs and spices, rising delicious in the air. After giving it a stir and sprinkling finely diced chilis over the surface, he covered the pot and came to sit across from Will.

“I think you’ve gleaned rather a lot from our brief time together,” he said, leaning his elbows on the table. “I imagine you find it difficult not to begin to piece together the personal history of anyone with whom you spend any significant measure of time.”

“It’s not on purpose,” Will muttered. He knew most saw it as an invasion of privacy. Just one of many reasons he avoided social situations as much as possible.

“I am not bothered by it,” Hannibal said. “In fact, I’m intrigued to hear just how much you’ve learned.” There was a challenge in his tone, that made Will sit up straighter and square his shoulders, made his eyes dart to Hannibal’s.

“Okay,” he said. “But remember you asked for it.”

Hannibal spread his hands in a gesture of magnanimity. Will narrowed his eyes, and then closed them, drawing upon his memory of the things he’d seen in Hannibal’s home--details his mind had stored and filed away, though he'd not dwelled on them at first.

The painting of the girl in the parlour and the sketches on the desk in the study, who had the same fine cheekbones and full lips as Hannibal; the décor; books from floor to ceiling, the pianoforte, Hannibal’s clothing; the worn, gold ring on the middle finger of his right hand, some ancient and unfamiliar language carved around the large chunk of polished amber.

In the stillness of Will’s mind, that eternal autumnal afternoon, the river twining and lapping between his feet, Will could call to mind all that and more.

“Your family is old--you can trace it to back to the formation of the Kingdom of Lithuania, if not further. You have a title, but you don’t flaunt it; you’d rather avoid the attention it would bring. You enjoy your practice here, though you don’t need it, your family’s wealth is more than enough to sustain you.”

“You’re alone in the world now--you were close to your sister, but she is gone.” It was a traumatic loss, but Will kept that detail held back, unwilling to make a point of it. Hannibal had said he thought he was ready for this, but he couldn’t have anticipated how much Will would see.

“You studied abroad, first in England, then in Asia, finally settling in Germany. You were well respected, made a name and a life for yourself, but you returned out of obligation. You resent the occupation and the way the Russian soldiers have become more ruthless in their

eradication of Lithuanian culture and language. Your presence is an act of resistance, doing your part to preserve the history of your people."

Will opened his eyes, startled, when he felt the brush of skin against his own. Hannibal's soft, cool fingers on the back of his hand. Will blinked, staring at the place where they touched. Hannibal's fingers spread, pushing gently along the swell of Will's thumb and the curve of his wrist, ghosting along delicate nerves. He shivered and pulled his hand back, looked up at Hannibal who did not look the least bit regretful or embarrassed at his own boldness.

For a second, words stuck in the back of Will's throat. He considered scolding Lecter for having taken such liberty with Will's person. Then again, Will had taken his own liberties with Hannibal's mind, and he knew that to be a far more intimate, egregious crime.

The light in Hannibal's eye said he didn't mind, and so Will let the tension bleed from his frame. His hand went limp against the table again, and he nudged it carefully forward, until just their fingers were touching. Hannibal licked his lips, a brief flash of his tongue, red and wet, and his white, crooked teeth. Will felt a dull throb in his gut.

"Your mind is a truly remarkable thing, Will," Hannibal said. "Your powers of observation, your memory." He reached out, fingers fluttering lightly over Will's temple and down the curve of his cheek.

Will was caught by Hannibal's eyes, glinting red in the low, warm light. He took Hannibal's hand in his, thumb pressing in between delicate bones, and laid it back against the table top on the pretext of looking at the ring there. Clearing his throat, he tapped lightly at the engraving and said, "Is it Slavic?"

"Baltic," Hannibal corrected. He gestured along the text, "Lektus, Count of Lituae--the closest approximation to the ethnonym used by my people at the time. The exact year was not recorded, though it was certainly in the last quarter of the 8th century."

"Now it is your turn," Hannibal said, voice barely more than a whisper.

The kitchen was warm, a damp heat that made Will want to tug at his collar, perhaps undo a button or two. It made his hair curl against his temple, and Hannibal's cheeks flush red. All at once, Will felt oddly safe in what he knew rationally to be a profoundly dangerous situation, and so he answered honestly.

"My family isn't old," he said. "My mother was an actress. Maybe still is, I don't know." He shook his head ruefully. "She left when I was still quite young. My father...I'm not even certain he's my father, but he was a good man. He loved my mother and wanted to spare her the shame and scandal, so he married her."

"He came over with his parents in the 60's from Scotland, settled in New York and followed my ma to New Orleans, where we stayed even after she'd gone. He was a boat hand, away for months at a time, and the landlady cared for me until I was old enough to care for myself."

It wasn't until now, staring past Hannibal at the flickering fireplace, that he even thought about how long it had been since his last letter to his father went unanswered. "I'm not even sure he's still alive. I haven't spoken to him in five years."

"You were as much an orphan as I, in many ways," Hannibal said, in a detached, matter-of-fact manner. Will appreciated that he didn't attempt to express any sympathy.

"I suppose he loved me, as much as he knew how," Will said. It was important to explain, to defend the man who did his best to raise him. "He taught me everything he knew about boats and fishing. I think he always assumed I'd join him, eventually. When I went away to college we grew apart. He couldn't understand what I wanted out of life, and I couldn't understand how he was content with the life he'd lived. We were like strangers."

Silence followed his words, hanging between them, but it was unexpectedly comfortable. Around them Will was acutely aware of sounds inside and outside the house--the liquid gently simmering on the stovetop, the wind whistling against the windowpane, Abigail moving around upstairs somewhere, a door closing.

"I've changed my mind," Hannibal said after a moment. "You can help with dinner--come." He went to the stove, and Will scrambled after him. Though he was thankful for the change in subject, he was surprised to find that he didn't actually regret having shared what he had. In fact, it felt much like a burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

They made the soup together, Will mashing the marrow while Hannibal finished thickening the broth. By the time they'd added the marrow back to the pot, the pie was finished. Hannibal went to select a bottle of wine from his cellar, leaving Will to carry their dinner to the table. This time, three place-settings had been made--rather than being seated at the opposite end of the table, one sat at the head of the table, the others to the direct left and right.

As if summoned by the scent of food, Abigail appeared in the doorway. In her normal day dresses with their high collars, rows of buttons down the front, and the tidy little bustles in the back, her hair tied back in a bun, she looked severe. Serious and sad.

Her evening dress was much more modern--a sleek emerald green velvet and white lace gown that clung in a way that some might consider immodest. In it, with her hair half-down in ringlets, she looked both younger and lighter. She gave Will an easy smile when she saw him, toying with the choker that hid her scar.

"I'm glad you're staying," she said, in English, her accent thick. "It's so nice to have company at dinner."

Will laughed uncomfortably, rubbing the back of his neck. He should probably apologise ahead of time for what a horrible guest he was, but Hannibal chose that moment to return with the wine, saying, "Yes, the mood is always much improved by fresh blood."

Abigail rolled her eyes, and Will felt guilty for ever insinuating that Hannibal's relationship with her was anything other than fatherly. It was clear in how they looked at one another, that fond, familial ease between them.

And Abigail was a pleasant addition to the dinner table. Bubbly and bright as only one so young could be. Will could probe deeper and see the scars her father had left beyond the physical, but he didn't want to. He wanted to allow her this façade that even she had begun to believe.

Though she was maybe only a decade younger than him, Will felt a foreign, paternal protectiveness for her--similar to the empathy he felt for the victims of the crimes he investigated, only this one had survived, and that made him savagely glad.

Perhaps it was all the talk of family and orphans earlier that made him think it, but here at this table, Will felt at home. How absurd that with virtual strangers he was more comfortable and freer with his words than ever he was with his closest friends!

After dinner, as promised, Hannibal and Abigail took turns playing the piano, and Abigail did indeed have a songbird's voice, singing some folk songs in German, and stumbling along with the Polish and Lithuanian ones Hannibal was teaching her. No amount of coaxing from either of them would compel Will to join in the singing, but he watched them with a smile that was honest and uncoerced, warmed not only by the fire, but by their presence.

With all the stress he felt over the case, the evening was a welcome respite. And again the wine left his head spinning, though this time Will made no protest when Hannibal offered to walk him home. Abigail bid him goodnight with an impulsive hug, and Will returned it with an indulgent grin over her head, which Hannibal returned with his own expression of exasperation.

They walked side by side down the streets of trampled and muddied snow, and Will was stricken, as the evening before, by the way the moonlight illuminated the night--almost clearer than the daylight had for him this morning, though he attributed that to his unfortunate headache.

And then there was the entrancing sound of distant music drifting over the wind. He commented that there must be a party, and Hannibal hummed, but offered no further comment. When Will glanced at him, there was an odd, secret smile toying at his lips. Will felt his answering smile, though he could not explain why he was so glad.

It was utterly foolish, the notion drifting through Will's mind, unbidden and unwelcome, that this walk fit his perception of a lovers' stroll. The feeling was stronger still, when again Hannibal stopped outside the inn and clasped both Will's hands in his.

From within there came the boisterous noises of Zeller holding court at the bar with the townspeople, but out here, in the still night, Will's breath clouding in the air, he felt as if no one existed in the entire world except Hannibal and himself.

Will waited in almost breathless anticipation for what Hannibal would do. But as before, he simply stared into Will's eyes for what seemed an eternity, nodded at last, and said, "Sleep well, Will."

As though in a daze, Will entered the inn and crossed through the main hall, towards the stairs. Exhaustion fell sudden and heavy on him, and he was all but oblivious to everyone

around him, until a hand caught his elbow. He startled, and turned to see Beverly looking at him, brows furrowed in concern. In her free hand, she held a candle.

“Is something the matter?” Will asked her absently. His mind was far away, recalling the way Hannibal’s eyes had looked by the low gaslight in the kitchen. He’d never seen anyone with that colour of pigmentation in their iris, the maroon that only showed in the shadow. Will was struck with a sudden curiosity to how they would look only by the faintest candlelight.

“Professor Graham?” Beverly said, with a shake of his arm, and Will realised she must have said something already.

“I’m sorry. I haven’t been sleeping well; I’m very tired,” he said, to excuse himself, and turned away to head up the stairs. Beverly held tight.

“Yes,” she agreed, “the walls are regrettably thin. I wouldn’t normally mention it, but given what it is you are pursuing, and how...alarming your nightmares have sounded…”

Will was mortified, and held himself still, staring at the floor at his feet. “I’m sorry,” he said again. “Often times my work leads me down dark, winding roads from which it can be difficult to escape--particularly in dreams.”

“Please,” Beverly said, her voice kind, and embarrassed.. “Don’t apologise for that. I’m sorry for even mentioning it. Only…” She bit her lip and looked behind, where her husband was watching them with a vaguely disapproving expression.

“Beverly?” Will asked, curious though his cheeks burnt.

“My husband, like the locals, think it’s just superstition. They pretend not to see what’s right in front of their eyes. The Russians have buried the legends and folklore with time and fear of reprisal, but the old woman who owned this inn before us would tell me the stories. Demons and spirits who haunted these woods. I didn’t believe it at first, but I’ve lived here long enough. There are things I can’t explain.”

She pressed the candle into Will’s hand and said, “There’s a bit of folklore that says if you draw a circle of wax around your bed, and leave the candle to burn while you sleep, it will protect your dreams from evil spirits.”

Despite his shame, Will was touched by the gesture. “Thank you,” he told her earnestly, closing his fingers around the candle.

In his room, after closing the curtains and indulging in a warm bath that left him feeling loose and pleasantly sleepy, and gulping down almost an entire pitcher of water in hopes of ameliorating the effects of his inevitable hangover, Will lit the candle. He’d had to pull the bed out from the wall to make a circle all the way around, and he felt a little guilty as he began to dribble the wax on the wooden floor. Then again, he had the tacit approval of the landlady.

Will did not hold out any particular hope that the splattered, lopsided ring on the ground would offer him any relief from the nightmares that plagued him. The monsters in his dreams

came from within his own mind, not from without.

He climbed into bed and drew the covers up to his chin, the room cast in eerie, flickering shadows as the candle's flame shifted in the air currents. Will's thoughts drifted again to those peculiar red eyes, and within minutes he'd fallen asleep, mind occupied by Hannibal Lecter.

*

When Will woke, the candle was out and the room was plunged in absolute darkness. Not even a hint of moonlight peeked from around the edges of the curtains. The faint, glowing embers of the banked fire were absent, which might explain the cold of the room.

Will sat up, reaching blindly for the lamp on the bedside table, but his fingers found nothing but air. Curious, heart beating slightly faster now, Will swung his legs over the side of the bed, but rather than coming to rest on the cold, wooden floor, the ground was dusty and uneven.

He stood, cautiously putting one foot in front of the other, hands outstretched, but after several minutes of walking, there was nothing. No barrier of any sort. The ground was easy to traverse, even in the dark--he had no fear of stumbling and falling. It was chilly, but the still, comfortable cool of the night after the first snowfall. Though he was dressed only in his sleep robe, he was not uncomfortable.

This was not the winding corridor or the dense forest of the previous evenings. There was no other presence lurking in the dark, tracing his steps. No impetus to run, for fear of what might happen if he did not. And though it was dark, Will felt safe. When he stopped and sat, the ground was suddenly softer, like the raised surface he'd woken upon, and he lay down.

How long he rested there, supine, he could not say, but it was a supremely restful feeling. Yet very, very gradually he became aware of a growing light at the edges of the horizon--one he only now realised existed. Faint, glowing grey creeping upward and inward, and

Then, all at once, with booming sound and a rush of air that fluttered through Will's hair and rippled at the ends of his night robe, the presence from the forest and corridor was there with him. It slunk up the raised surface and straddled Will in the dark. Will could only see the glistening of its eyes, reflecting the faint light.

"Clever boy," it hissed, something familiar about the lilting voice. "Surely you didn't think that would keep me from you for long?"

Will shivered, not from the cold press of its body, which, through the fabric of his gown he could feel every line, but from his own reaction--the way his very blood seemed to call out in answer to the touch. "No," he whispered. "I didn't think it would keep you away at all."

The creature chuckled, mouth against Will's throat, and the sound was somehow both cruel and affectionate. Without meaning to, Will swallowed, hard, making the sharp teeth press more deeply into sensitive skin. Frigid fingers tipped in thin, finely manicured nails traced down, pulling the fabric of Will's gown aside.

Those teeth followed along, scraping, but never breaking the flesh, and settled in the curve where neck and shoulder met, nestling there as if Will had been made from a mold specifically for this purpose. The prospect was both thrillingly erotic, and deeply disturbing.

“Oh,” the creature said, in a low purr. “I’m going to savour every last drop of you, Will Graham.”

*

Will woke, soaked through in a cold sweat. The window was wide open, curtains fluttering in the freezing wind that tore through them, and in the bright morning light, Will could see the place where the circle had been disturbed. Five thin lines raked through the wax and gouged the wooden floor beneath, and Will could still feel the phantom touch on his neck, as though the icy-cold hand had burned a mark on him.

Chapter End Notes

I really wish I could stop Hannibal playing these cruel, cruel games with Will, but he has so much fun doing it...

Okay, I changed length on this again. I probably could have done this in 2 or 3 chapters, but it would have been very rushed. So I decided to let it run its course. There is a very clear end in sight and an outline of what will happen, so don't worry, it will be finished fairly soon!

Just Dying for the Thrill

Chapter Notes

This chapter is unbeta'd. I'll probably go through it later tonight or in the next day or so, but feel free to let me know if you see some glaring errors! I just wanted to get it out asap!

Some lines borrowed or paraphrased from Shiizakana

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sitting upright, heart racing in his chest, Will felt caught between sleep and wakefulness. A baby was crying somewhere, and from the world beyond the windows, voices were raised in panic. Though the words carried to Will's ears, he could not make sense of them, too rushed and frantic for him to hope to translate.

There was a knock on his door, and Will tripped in his haste to answer it, wrapped up in fabric. It took him a moment of fumbling to untangle himself before he realised it was his nightgown, torn into shreds, falling around him. He grabbed his robe from the desk chair and tied it around his waist before flinging open the door.

Molly stood there, crying infant tied to her chest. She was poorly put together, hair falling whispy down from her bun, dark circles under her eyes, patting the child roughly on the back. A quick glance around the room made her mouth twitch into a grimace. "There's another body," she said.

*

Will's body was sore and stiff, as though he'd been lying on cold stone all night long. Dressing seemed to take forever, and though he threw back a cupful of coffee before hurrying out into the morning, his head felt as though it was swaddled in cotton. As with the other morning, it took little effort for him to find his way to the scene of the crime. There was a trail of townspeople and soldiers leading into the mouth of the forest, though as the path grew more treacherous with thick undergrowth, many fell behind. A good twenty minutes outside of town, Will turned a bend in the path and came upon the scene quite suddenly.

A man lay in the centre of the road, his throat and chest ripped open, almost rending the body in half. The snow beneath him was stained crimson with blood. It spread from his body, blossoming wide around him like wings. There was more further down the path, arterial spray over the snow and trees, falling in a thick stream and scattered spots. Still brightly coloured where it stained the man's clothing, the blood could not have been shed more than an hour or so before.

Soldiers gathered around the man's body, and constables, speaking in low tones. Will could only just make out a few words, a debate as to whether it was a wolf or a bear responsible for the attack.

“Will,” Hannibal greeted him, and Will was so caught up in the sight, he hadn’t noticed Hannibal until he spoke.

Will could barely see Hannibal’s grim expression through the fog that clouded his mind. Unthinking, he brushed past him, following the trail the man had left behind to where he could see the origins of the attack. It was enough for the events to begin to coalesce in Will’s mind.

Here the single set of footprints led down the path. Will walked alongside them, back towards the crime scene, adopting the pace and posture. *Shoulders huddled against the cold, stride short but hurried. He is not afraid, merely cold and tired. He has no time for the childish, backwoods superstitions in which the others in town indulge.*

Here something distracted the man--the footprints ran together and overtop one another, turning in a circle. *Something stirs in the forest, faint but nearby. One needn’t fear demons and ghouls where there are hungry beasts lurking about. But no matter where he looks, straining his eyes in the early morning light, there are no animals to be seen. No rustling bushes, no rumbling growls.*

Here the stride lengthened and sped up. The nearest town on this path was a good two hours on foot. It was a fairly well-travelled route, unlike the one Will had used to make his journey. Not as many recorded deaths. The man must have left quite early to make this trip. Superstitious or not, it would have made more sense to wait until dawn had fully broken.

And the murderer was cutting it awfully close, to strike so close to sunrise. There would have already been ambient light rising above the horizon when the attack occurred. Why risk such a thing when there were other victims readily at hand? For most certainly this had been the work of their vampire, hadn't it?

Will could see it written clearly in the other set of prints a short distance ahead of where the man was hurrying along. These prints appeared abruptly in the middle of the path, as if their maker had materialised from thin air. Just as Will suspected; the vampire travelling across a great distance without leaving a print behind. Here the victim came to a sudden stop.

From the tree above, a creature lands before him--it is neither man nor beast, at least no earthly beast. It raises from its crouch, unfolding to tower above him. The frame of an iron skeleton wraps around fur and sinew, bones gleaming in the early morning light. Through the curve of its ribs, he can see the inner workings of the beast. Its terrible jaws open wide, and there is no time to run before it is upon him.

Will stumbled backward in surprise and had to bite back his startled cry when strong arms and a solid body caught him and held him tight. His heart pounded in his chest, mind racing, caught between the present reality and the echoing image of the past. No matter how he struggled to calm his breathing, he could not help but fight against the arms restraining him.

“Will.” Hannibal’s voice was firm and grounding. Strong hands maneuvered Will away from the path and the sound of curious voices. They turned him around, planted his back against a tree trunk, tilted his chin upwards to meet familiar brown eyes.

Over the haze of blood and crunching bone, the scent of viscera hanging on the air, daylight began to filter in, rinsing away the lingering vision. Will forced himself to take a calming breath and disentangle himself from Hannibal’s hold.

“What is it?” Hannibal asked, brow furrowed. “What did you see?”

“That,” Will spat out, and swayed on his feet, shrugging off the touch when Hannibal reached for him again. “That *thing* was not a bear or a wolf.”

“You think it was the vampire,” Hannibal said, not quite a question nor a statement.

Will made a sound of disgust and shoved at Hannibal’s chest, sidling out from between him and the tree to pace. No matter how deep the breaths he drew, he couldn’t seem to fill his lungs enough to lift the weight that had settled in his chest.

“It’s not the vampire, either,” he snapped. “It certainly isn’t what killed that girl in the stable.”

A strange look of pride and approbation flashed across Hannibal’s face, but Will was too distracted by his thoughts of this creature to dwell upon it. “One could not be further in temperament and design from the other. The vampire is calm and methodical.”

As he spoke, Will felt that by now familiar mindset taking over, easing his racing pulse with its icy touch. It spread sluggish through his veins, slowing his breathing, allowing his thoughts time to catch hold and take full form. This crime was daylight against the midnight black of those committed by his vampire. It cast stark clarity in all the dark corners that remained unseen to Will until now.

“More than seeing the proper order of things, more than assuming his rightful place at the top of the foodchain, our vampire views his actions as creation. He is taking something utterly lacking in purpose, something irredeemably dull, and transforming it into something beautiful. Whether through the assemblage of his romantic tableaux, or in allowing his victim’s blood to nourish him and sustain his life, he restores purpose to them, in death.”

Will turned on his heel again and met Hannibal’s interested gaze. From within the grip of the vampire’s mind, Will observed him, tilting his head to the side as he drank him in. Hannibal was something both purposeful and beautiful already, and yet those qualities would not save him. As much as the vampire sought to create, stronger still was his desire to possess. There was more still that Will did not understand, myriad motivations, each more mystifying and unknowable than the last.

With a firm shake, Will attempted to free himself from the vampire’s thoughts. “This beast, on the other hand, cares not for art or theatre. It was operating on pure instinct.”

“As far as I could tell, there was nothing missing from the body,” Hannibal said. “Though it is difficult to say until I have performed an autopsy--many of the organs have been torn apart, and the pieces are scattered.”

“No,” Will agreed thoughtfully. “It isn’t hunting for food. It’s pure savagery, for sport.”

*

Hannibal performed the autopsy in a dingy little tent near the barracks. Will had watched more than his fair share of autopsies over the course of his relationship with investigators in America, and this was no different. Hannibal had been correct in his assumption that no meat had been taken during the attack.

With two radically different killers struggling for his attention, and the way the presence from his dream lingered, Will was pained and exhausted before mid-morning. After Hannibal had finished his debriefing with the Russians, he took Will by the elbow and led him to his home.

“Your coffee has incredible restorative properties,” Will told him, seated by the fireplace with a second cup of it in his hands.

Hannibal quirked him an indulgent smile, sipping from his own cup. “In the busy modern world, it is important we take the time to slow down and allow ourselves a moment of quiet reflection. Such a practice can do wonders for our health, both mental and physical.”

Now it was Will’s turn to be indulgent. He smiled without entirely meaning to, overtaken with a momentary drowsiness, between the warmth of the drink and the fire, and the comfort of the chair. “I’ll slow down and reflect once I’ve caught our killer.” As quickly as that, his mood soured. Speaking the words only served to remind him of his current dilemma. “Killer*s*,” he corrected himself, and slammed his fist down on the arm of the chair, “Damnit!”

At once, Will caught himself, biting his lip against any further outburst, and glanced at Hannibal to gauge his reaction. His colleagues back home were used to such language from him, but he did his best to reign in his temper around others.

Hannibal did not appear surprised or scandalised. He watched Will evenly over the rim of his cup as he drank, then sat aside his cup and licked his lips before speaking. “Yes,” Hannibal agreed. “This does cast a rather interesting light on the situation, does it not?”

Will snorted. “That’s putting it mildly.”

He was angry at Jack and angry with himself, and overall with this whole bloody affair. Was it not enough that he struggled to come to terms with the existence of the supernatural as it visited his dreams each evening, inspiring in him desires he dare not reflect upon? Now there was another, arguably more dangerous creature on the horizon. Though perhaps this beast was possessing of a victim profile that Will had not yet discerned, he had no doubt it would hunt and kill whoever fell within its sights.

“Would you now attribute the other victims of mutilation to this other killer, as well?” Hannibal asked.

Will shook his head, distracted. His mind was elsewhere, reviewing the records he'd spent so much time with of late. The names and dates were etched there indelibly, along with every last detail. It helped him think to hold the papers in his hands and read the words again and again, but in the end, it was unnecessary.

"No," he said at last, and took a moment to reflect upon his wandering thoughts before expounding upon that. This victim had been drained of his blood, certainly, but it had not been consumed. It had been left instead to leech into the ground, wasted. "No, this is something altogether different…"

There were some deaths Will had disregarded before. Occurring in recent years, and attributed to animals, Will had little reason to think otherwise. He had readily discounted the possibility that they were the work of the vampire. The unrestrained violence was too raw and cruel, and as Molly had pointed out, the woods were populated with hungry animals.

Will stood, going to the table of books and shuffling through them. "Do you recall the death of a Quaid Foster? Irishman, early twenties…?"

Hannibal crossed his legs, stroked a finger across his chin and tapped it against his bottom lip. It was only after he spoke that Will realised he'd been staring, transfixed, at the way the swell of his lip flattened at the touch. "Will?"

"I'm sorry," Will said, cheeks burning. He turned his attention back to the books on the table, gaze unfocussed. "I didn't--could you say again?"

"I said," Hannibal drawled, amused, and Will could hear the sound of shifting fabric as he got to his feet. "Mister Foster was found in the river. It would be difficult to say for certain what became of the majority of his organs, whether they were eaten by the animal that attacked him, or fish. Equally impossible to know whether his killer drank his blood, or if he bled out and the water washed it away."

"Did you know the young man?" Will asked. If he could just train his thoughts on the matter at hand, rather than how closely Hannibal stood at his side, how their hands brushed when they reached for the same book...if he could just *focus,* this would all become clear.

Hannibal drew a breath and let it out on a sigh. "I knew of him. Strapping fellow, full of vigor, in little need of a doctor's care. But his young woman spoke highly of him. The chambermaid at the inn, Molly. She was carrying his child at the time of his death, and was forever regaling me with tales of how he planned on marrying her and taking her back to Ireland. He was a trapper, and a rather good one, at that."

Will closed his eyes briefly; he'd assumed that Foster was Molly's lover, but having it confirmed made him ache for her. Empathy was old hat for him, but sympathy he was unused to. "A trapper," Will murmured.

A thought struck him, and he scrambled through the papers on the desk, grabbed the journal that held last year's death records. Hannibal's barely contained curiosity radiated from him, though he held his tongue. After a moment flipping through the pages, Will found what he was looking for. He ran his index finger along the entry.

Kasparas Simonis, 42, hunter. Missing 11/09/89. Partial remains recovered 23/09/89. Cause of death impossible to determine until further evidence is recovered. Beneath, Hannibal had listed the body parts recovered and the damage done to them.

"Ah, yes," Hannibal said. "Mister Simonis' death was a great mystery to one and all. He was an accomplished hunter, renowned throughout the area for his skill with a rifle. On more than one occasion he'd received bounties for ridding the forest of particularly dangerous animals. It seemed highly unlikely that he would meet his end by claw or fang."

"Yes," Will said absently. "And…" he flipped through the pages. "Marijus Astrauckas. He was a hunter, too."

"I was not as familiar with Mister Astrauckas," Hannibal said. "I believe he'd come from the south not too long before he was mauled to death. They found the body near a bear cave."

"This man today, what do you know of him?" Will asked, letting his mind wander. It wasn't difficult to make the connection here, hunters and trappers. The question was *why*, which would hopefully lead to *who*. If there even was a who. Was this creature capable of taking another, human form? Or did it wander the forest in that hellish form? Certainly someone would have spotted it by now, if that were the case.

"Professor Henrikas Poškus, according to his papers. Until I hear back from Antašava, I can't offer any more concrete information than that. Based on his build and condition, and his manner of dress, I would hazard a guess that he was neither trapper, nor hunter."

Will let his eyes fall closed, bringing to mind Henrikas Poškus. A learned man, professor of...science? Will could see it now. But why would he be coming here, and in such a particular rush? The man had held no patience for superstition, because he thought he'd known better. Was it possible he had some information on his own killer?

"I should speak to the other hunters, the tanners, the taxidermists."

"Will," Hannibal said, voice gentle. "You said yourself, this isn't your vampire. Perhaps it is best left to the local constabulary."

"Do you think they're equipped to handle such a thing?" Will snapped.

Hannibal spread his hands before him, a gesture of wary capitulation. "Are you?" he asked.

Will ran a hand through his hair, making a noise of frustration. "I know what I'm dealing with. One of these men is bound to know something--to have seen something. A beast of that size can't have gone entirely unnoticed. At the very least I could attempt to discover some weakness, or be led to its hiding place. Catch it off-guard."

"A foolhardy undertaking," Hannibal said, and when Will levelled him with a challenging glare, Hannibal lifted his chin and added, "I insist on going with you."

Will chuckled and ducked his head to hide his pleased, blushing smile. Though he wouldn't say it out loud, he'd been hoping as much.

*

They spent the afternoon travelling from business to business, making inquiries. By and large, Will was reliant on Hannibal's translating services. The first two men, a tanner and hunter, spoke in Lithuanian, but the third, another hunter, spoke Polish, so at least Will could follow along a bit. All of them were quite aware of the beast already.

"I don't understand," Will said, Hannibal translating in an undertone as he spoke. "Why haven't you told the constables or soldiers."

The man scoffed, jerked his head at Hannibal as he responded. Hannibal nodded his understanding. "The soldiers don't believe. They say it's nonsense. The constables are too afraid to do anything. If it can get Simonis, they don't stand a chance against it."

Will leaned forward, interest keen. "Have you seen it?"

The man shook his head, hesitant and fitful. He looked between the two of them and after a moment, spoke in hushed tones, muttering at his folded hands. "I didn't want to see it, so I didn't look," Hannibal echoed. "But I've heard it. The joints screech when it moves. Sounds like something dying."

Randall Tier, the taxidermist, lived in a cabin at the edge of the forest. He did his business from his home, and stepping inside felt something like stepping into a naturalist museum. The walls were lined with mounted animal heads: stags and wolves of course but exotic beasts as well--tiger and leopard, zebra and lion.

In glass cases around the perimeter of the room were displayed weapons made of teeth and bone, hilts of tanned hide. Fully articulated skeletons took up the space in the middle of the open room, alongside their stuffed and posed counterparts. It was truly fascinating to see--the animals had a sort of vibrancy to them; Will half expected them to draw a breath and begin to move. Tier was possessing of great skill.

Tier was German, to Will's relief. It was a language in which he had more than a passing proficiency. Enough to ask his questions and understand most of what Tier had to say in response. "Have you ever heard of such a creature?" Will asked, after describing what he'd seen in his vision.

"Outside of fairytales, you mean?" Tier asked, a faint curling of his lip. Though he wore a placid expression, there was a nervous energy hanging about him, as though he'd like to be fidgeting. As though he felt ill at ease in his own skin. Strange, for a man who had to maintain a steady hand for his livelihood. He must have struggled a long time to overcome his natural state.

"Of course," Will allowed, though it was clear, through his amusement, Tier believed in the beast as surely as Will himself did.

"Well," Tier said. He turned his attention to the room at large, walking among his creations. "Assuming such a thing does exist, it's only doing what nature has intended for it to do. It is simply following instinct."

“This creature does exist,” Will said. He took a turn around the skeleton of what Tier had labelled as a *Prehistoric Cave Bear*, coming face to face with the man and meeting his eye. “And nature has nothing to do with it."

“How do you know?” Tier asked. “Who are you to determine what is natural and what is not? I’ve seen strange things in my travels, Mister Graham. Beasts you would not believe. But do you know what they all have in common?”

Will glanced at Hannibal, and was intrigued by what he saw. There was a speculative, almost appreciative expression on his face, an altogether fatherly air in his regard of Tier. Distracted, Will asked, “What’s that?”

“Each beast is created for a singular purpose: to use the tools with which it is equipped in order to survive.” Tier ran a loving hand over the giant, curving fang of the cave bear’s skull. “The giraffe’s long neck to reach the highest foliage. The chameleon’s camouflage to hide among branch and leaf alike. Claws to rend and teeth to chew.”

“Each using the proper tools necessary for the job,” Will surmised.

“But it's what's inside the skull that tells you what that job is,” Tier murmured. “Your beast is equipped with deadly tools. Death is on his mind. What could be more natural than following those urges and using those tools to that end?”

“Well,” Hannibal said, clapping his gloved hands together once, when they’d emerged from Tier’s cabin in the growing twilight. “What a fascinating fellow.”

Will shot him a questioning look to see the wry smile Hannibal had aimed at him. Will couldn’t help but return the expression. “Quite,” he agreed.

The fresh air was delicious after being in that stuffy mausoleum, and the light outside was clear and bright. Nothing Tier had said was enough to condemn the man. He was strange and morbid, and neither was a crime. Yet Will knew, without a doubt, that somehow Randall Tier and the beast from the forest were connected to one another. But what to do about it? Will had no authority here, and those in charge wouldn’t believe a word he had to say.

“Will?” Hannibal’s hand fell on his shoulder.

“Sorry,” he said. “Lost in thought.”

“Understandable,” Hannibal said. It was nice, for once, to have someone who didn’t chastise him when his attention wandered. Who didn’t consider it rude. “I was asking if you would like to get dinner? There’s a restaurant down the lane from the church that serves the most delightful nettle soup.”

Now that he mentioned it, Will was aware of the fact that he’d barely eaten all day. Coffee and a honey cake for breakfast, half of a mushroom bun Nojus the Tanner had served them. “Have I worn out my welcome at your home?” he asked, only half teasing. He was more than a little concerned that there was truth to what he said.

“Merely worn me out. Being out all day has been exhausting,” Hannibal said, reassurance plain in the kindly smile on his face. “I’ve kept track of all the restaurants of note in the area for when I am in the mood to dine out.”

Will waved a hand in the direction of the church. “Nettle soup, huh?” he said, pulling a dubious face. “I’ve never had it.”

“A local delicacy, however there are other options, perhaps more familiar to you.”

“No,” Will said. He cautiously slipped his hand into the crook of Hannibal’s elbow. “I am willing to open myself to new experiences.”

The smile Hannibal gave him warmed Will down to his toes. He placed a hand over Will’s and led him down the slush-covered street.

*

Hannibal walked him back to the inn after dinner. They’d lingered over drinks, and the hour was growing late. Beverly greeted him with a vague smile, and didn’t comment on the state of his room. Brian and Molly refused to even look him the face. Now, no longer distracted by Hannibal and thoughts of the beast, Will was forced to deal with what had taken place last night.

Someone had tidied Will’s room in his absence. The windows were closed, the bed made, the wax gone from the floor. The shredded remains of his night robe had been discarded, and the fire glowing in the hearth had erased the chill from the room. A rug had been placed on the floor, between the bed and the window, and Will knew what he would see, if he were to lift it. He’d rather not.

Will sat on the edge of his bed, shoes discarded, coat and gloves set aside. He ran his hand along the bedspread and let his eyes fall closed, drawing on his memories of the dream, and all its accompanying sensations.

The pitch black, still and cold night, disturbed by the glowing grey light and that figure. Will could feel it now, pressed against him, as solid and real as it had felt in his dream. It pushed him down onto his back, hands ghosting through his clothing to reach bare skin, burning cold. Will gasped and arched into the touch.

There was a stirring in his groin at the memory of sharp teeth against his skin. Soft lips tickled the sensitive spot beneath the angle of his jaw. Will moaned, a faint, breathless sound, lifting his hips. The form above him shifted its weight and rolled against him, providing a delightful counterpoint for Will to grind against.

A sound from outside the door startled Will from his thoughts. Heavy tread on the steps and down the hall, a door opening and closing, a lock sliding into place. Will found that he had stretched himself out across the bed while lost in his memory, unbuttoned his shirt and let it hang open. One hand was down his open trousers, stroking himself with a tight grip.

It took a great deal of willpower to make himself let go, to sit himself upright and push aside the lustful thoughts. Will would not surrender to this creature's advances. He'd come here to find it out and destroy it. He would not fail Jack in this endeavour. He was stronger than that.

So instead Will got to his feet and went about his evening ablutions. The crosses and wax had not been a deterrent, so now he resorted to hanging garlic around his windows, as Beverly did downstairs. He drew on some of the more obscure mythology, scattering poppy seeds along the windowsill, then doused the area in holy water for good measure.

After, he bathed and dressed for bed, and wrote of this new creature to Jack. Hopefully before word even reached Jack, Will would be on his way home, triumphant. Inexplicably, thoughts of returning home brought a pang of sadness. Will was an introvert and a creature of habit. Whenever he travelled for work, he spent the entire time longing for the end of the case, when he could return to the familiarity, comfort, and safety of his rooms at the college dormitory.

Only now Will thought of Hannibal, and the new, unexpected experience of making a friend who understood him. It had only taken a few evenings, but he'd grown accustomed to having a regular dinner companion. And just the thought of no longer seeing the lines of that face in the flickering of firelight sent a pang through his heart. How could he return to his lonely existence at Georgetown after knowing Hannibal Lecter?

Will shoved those thoughts aside as viciously as the ones of his dream. He was faced with a very serious dilemma as to what to do about Randall Tier. Unless he were to catch him in the act, no one would believe anything Will had to say. Though there was a clear pattern to who the beast attacked, there was no way to predict who would be next, or when. Why some hunters and tanners were spared, while this professor had been torn apart.

Occupied by such thoughts, Will drifted off to sleep. Tonight, there were no dreams of supernatural lovers. Tonight Will found himself back in the forest. In the distance, he could see Henrikas Poškus being hunted by Randall Tier's beast. Will had little care for that. He was far more interested in the creature he felt lurking behind him.

Turning, he came face to face with the vampire, blacker than night. It seemed to draw in the growing morning light and radiate it back as shadow. The gash of its smile split across its face and blood spilled from its mouth--old, black blood, smelling of putrid death. "You've relied too heavily on your earthly means of protection, 'til now," it said, voice low and grating.

"You forget the strength of your own mind," it whispered, leaning as near as it could, as it was lashed to the trunk of a great, towering tree. "Your ability to create barriers."

"Yet here you are," Will hissed.

The creature laughed. "Here I am," it agreed in a soft purr. "What do you make of that, my dear Will? How have you let me in so far, only to snare me now? And what will you do with me now that you have me?"

"Destroy you, of course," Will said. "Why would I do anything else?"

The lines of the creatures face were all harsh angles. Now it quirked a single brow in amusement, and the expression was hauntingly familiar, yet Will couldn't place it. "You recognise the threat of the monster in your dreams, while failing to see the one right before your eyes. Or acknowledging the one growing within you."

Will swallowed hard against the surge of fear and nausea rising up in his throat. "What do you mean?"

"What Jack knows, but has been too selfish to admit," it said. Its red eyes were mesmerising. Without thinking about why, Will found himself stepping closer. "What you know, but have been too cowardly to admit."

"And what is that?" Will asked, voice the barest of whispers. Try as he might, he could not make his voice ring out any louder.

"That," the creature said, lips forming the words in such a tantalising way that Will found himself leaning forward, "Is to truly know a thing, as you know me, and as I know you, you must love it."

The sound of an animal howling from the world of the waking startled Will from sleep before he could react to the vampire's words. Distracted and disoriented, the dream hung over the room. He could still see the vampire before him, still hear its words inside his mind. The howl came again, nearer. It sounded like a hundred wolves, all calling from just outside his window.

Will was halfway to his feet, set to investigate the source, when the window exploded inward in a shower of broken glass and splintered wood. He stumbled back, crashing into the wall, as the beast from his vision climbed through the opening and stood before him, backlit by moonlight, glistening iron skeleton reflecting the dying flames in the fireplace.

Here in Will's room its height was even more impressive, the hulking form bending to fit within the confines of the low ceiling. Will's mouth went dry with fear, and he forced himself upright, hands clenched at his side. He had no weapons save his fists and the helpless rage from the vampire's words ricocheting through his skull.

With a great roar, Will propelled himself forward in the same moment the beast moved to strike.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the cliff-hanger! Originally this chapter was supposed to go on for another scene or two, but the length was getting out of hand, so this is where I split it! The end is clearly in sight, but I might end up extending this to 6 chapters--it's all down to how long the last part gets. Either way, it's all be plotted and outlined, and we're close to the finish line.

Sorry also for the long break over the holidays, but the next chapter will definitely not take as long to come, I promise!

And Moving in for the Kill

Chapter Notes

This is chapter is starting to earn the fic rating, jsyk

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It felt as though time had slowed down to a crawl. With a rushing noise like water falling from a great height, he could see all the possibilities spread out before him, branching again and again. The repercussions of each choice rippled outward for eternity or ended abruptly in the spill of his blood across the floor.

Something other than fear and adrenaline coursed through his veins. Something foreign and powerful and addictively thrilling. It made him stronger and faster, crossing the distance between them in the blink of an eye.

Will was not a physically imposing man. He spent most of his time in the classroom and the library, his dusty office and lonely dormitory. Jack had insisted on some lessons in the art of pugilism, should he ever come face to face with any of the creatures they hunted. His own skill in self defense had been all that had saved Jack during his own encounter, years ago.

Now Will called upon that training. He remembered the stances, and how to assess an opponent for weaknesses, but what weakness could be found in a creature of iron and fang. Every blow landed, but caused the beast no pain. It swiped at Will and caught him across the shoulder with razor sharp claws. There was the icy sensation of skin tearing open, and the hot rush of blood and endorphins that followed, numbing Will against the pain.

On the beast, there was no exposed expanse of skin, no vulnerable joints, even the eyes were guarded by the mask of bone it wore. That, Will realised, was a weakness of its own design. He ducked another blow, this one at his head. It glanced through his hair, and Will surged upward, wrapped his fingers around the cage of bones, and jerked back and down.

Exhilaration raced through him as the beast stumbled at the force of it. Impossible, that anything Will could do would have any impact on it, but the thing cried out and gnashed its teeth, as if suddenly realising Will's potential. Will could read it in the cool, assessing amber of the beast's eyes. It was wild, but there was intelligence lurking behind instinct.

The beast stumbled to its feet and put some space between them, circling Will. There was a low, rumbling growl that Will felt rattling up through his feet, along his bones and ribs, pulsing in his skull. That foreign thing in his blood responded in kind. Will bared his teeth and snarled. He could hear voices rising in terror and confusion outside the room and knew he must be quick, before anyone else was drawn into this conflict.

Beneath it all, Will reminded himself, this beast was still man. If the man could be killed, so could the beast. He dropped into a crouch, rolling to dodge a swipe of claws, but as he rose, the beast lunged at him, and its fangs bit into Will's already torn arm. Its jaws closed tight, ripping through flesh and muscle, and the thing shook him.

For a long moment, Will was aware of nothing other than the pain that lanced through him, down his arm, through his shoulder and up his neck. If this continued, he had little doubt his arm would be torn from his body. He reached up with his good hand, vision red and black around the edges, as his consciousness fled from him, and his fingers once again closed around the bone mask.

Somewhere far away, someone was laughing. It was a sinister, echoing sound. There was no one else in the room. The laughter came from within his own mind, bordering on hysterical as it rose in pitch and volume. Will drew on his fleeting strength, fingers tightening on bone, and he twisted with all his might.

A sick crunch, the sound of bone snapping, rung out in the air. Will was wrenched to the side, and then the grip on him slackened, and he and the beast fell to the floor together. It landed half on top of him, breathing hot on Will's wound, it's great iron chest rising and falling unsteadily.

Will levered himself up, rolled them, and cried out in wordless pain as he pried the teeth from his skin. Blood poured from the wound, but he didn't stop to spare a moment's thought. On hand and knees he crawled to the fireplace, blood-slick fingers grasping for the fire poker. The beast watched him, paralysed and close to death, breath rattling ragged through it.

Using the post of the bed, Will dragged himself to his feet. He left a trail of blood behind him as he crossed the room, each step less sure than the last. Then with his full weight behind it, he shoved the tip of the poker between the spindly casing of bone, right into the beast's eye. Will watched them change, from amber to vivid blue. It was the last thing he saw before darkness swallowed him, and he collapsed to the floor.

*

The bed in which Will lay was heavenly--the mattress cradled him gently, and the sheets were warm and incredibly soft against his bare skin. All around him was the faint scent of lavender and vanilla. The pain, which had been unbearably vibrant before, was now little more than a dull throb down his right side.

It took a great deal of effort to force his eyes open, but his heart was racing in fearful anticipation. He was not a man who'd placed any faith in some divine being or lived his life a certain way in promise of everlasting peace in the hereafter.

Thankfully, the first thing his eyes lit upon was Hannibal, sitting at his bedside. He let his gaze wander, taking in his condition--pristine white bandages from his elbow up to his shoulder and around his chest. He tried to move the fingers of that hand, but though he could feel them, if he concentrated, they would barely respond, only twitching against the bedspread.

“What happened?” he croaked, and Hannibal pressed a glass of cold water to his lips, from which Will drank greedily.

“It would appear that Randall Tier attacked you, dressed in armour fashioned from the bone and fur of the beasts in his collection,” Hannibal said.

“No.” Will gave a firm shake of his head and immediately regretted it, as pain ricocheted through his skull. “It was the beast.”

“Hmmm.” Hannibal sounded more thoughtful than argumentative. “It was Tier's body they found, and I’m afraid the people in town would prefer a simpler explanation.”

Will snorted. “Fools,” he muttered. He was too groggy and comfortable to care much for etiquette, and Hannibal didn’t seem to be offended. He gave Will a soft, indulgent smile.

After a moment, Will had to look away, casting his gaze at his lap instead. He could feel a blush spreading across his cheeks and down his neck, and was all too aware of the fact that he was naked, save a pair of shorts. The blanket was drawn half-way up his chest, baring far more skin than he was accustomed to anyone seeing.

“Thank you,” he said, drawing a hand lightly along his bandaged arm. “I--I thought I was going to lose it. I thought for certain it was damaged beyond repair.”

“For another surgeon, perhaps,” Hannibal said. There was a faint thread of amused self-satisfaction in his tone. He reached out to rest his wrist against the skin of Will’s forehead. The touch was shockingly cold--was he already in the grips of fever? “You did lose a fair amount of blood, however. I provided a transfusion.”

Will’s eyes widened in surprise. “You personally?”

“I was closest at hand, and fit to donate. Thankfully you are not showing any adverse reaction so far. Your temperature is only slightly elevated, though there could be any number of explanations for that.”

“I--” Will didn’t even know how to respond to that. It felt too intimate, the idea of Hannibal’s blood in his veins. More, it was an uncomfortable reminder of the erotic dream of the vampire, how he’d longed for that exchange of blood. “Thank you,” he finally managed.

“There is no need for thanks,” Hannibal said. His touch lingered against Will’s face, now his palm turning to cup his cheek. “I am remarkably grateful you are alive, Will.”

Will froze, heart caught in his throat. He waited as Hannibal leaned closer, breathless. “Hannibal,” he murmured, his own gaze falling to Hannibal’s mouth, full and red. Unthinking, he lifted a hand to rest on the curve of Hannibal’s neck.

For the second time that evening, it felt as though time had slowed down. Hannibal’s skin was smooth and cool beneath his hand, and he was close enough for Will to see all the variation in colour in his eyes--brown and gold, red that sparked in the low lighting.

There was something missing--something Will couldn't quite put his finger on, but his mind wouldn't focus on anything other than the look of intent on Hannibal's face. His eyelids drooped, fatigue and desire making them heavy, and he tilted his head back and to the side instinctively, to allow Hannibal closer. And then, Hannibal's hand fell away, and Will reigned in his disappointment as Hannibal pulled back.

Hannibal cleared his throat and stood, running his fingers over a brown glass bottle on the nightstand. "If the pain becomes too strong, you may take a drachm of laudanum. For now, you should rest." He took Will's hand in his own, thumb dragging absently over skin. "You'll be safe here." There was a profound sincerity in his words and a hard look in his eyes, that promised disaster to anyone who might attempt to do Will harm.

Will looked down at their joined hands and swallowed hard. There was a bandage wrapped around his palm, and Will didn't remember using his fist to strike the beast, but he must have. He could feel the strain of split skin across his knuckles and his palm, where he'd gripped the bone mask.

"Thank you. Again, and again, thank you. Not only for this evening, but for all you've done."

Hannibal lifted Will's hand between them. He kissed the back of his hand, lips open, breath stirring the fine hairs there, and Will shivered. "Sweet dreams, Will." He laid Will's hand gently back against the sheet and rose.

Left alone, Will was able to focus on his condition. The pain was dully throbbing all throughout his right side, but it certainly could have been worse. Will didn't want to think of how things might have turned out differently, if not for Hannibal. Surviving the beast, only to succumb to fever, or bleed to death. He ran his hand lightly over the shoulder bandage, thankful for the shock of pain--a reminder he was alive and intact.

Hannibal's spare room was easily the nicest Will had ever occupied. Blue and green striped wallpaper, white furnishings with gilt golden accents that brightened the evening gloom. Thick red curtains at the windows and the frame of the bed, and a cheerful fire flickering in the hearth to keep the winter cold at bay.

The room felt too empty without Hannibal's presence. It was so strange for a man like Will, generally so happy in his solitude, to be missing his company already. It was true he was intriguing--there were very few people in Will's life that he couldn't read like an open book, and that was refreshing. Even as unsettled as he was when Hannibal was around.

There was a night robe hanging over the back of the plush loveseat, and Will gritted his teeth against the pain as he struggled to put it on. He made his way into the adjoining bathroom, with it's modern toilet and electrical lighting.

The bathtub was long and deep, with a heating unit attached to the water pipes. Will longed to make use of it, but it would have to wait. He could barely remain on his feet long enough to use the lavatory, he was so exhausted. Far more than could be explained by the hour. He'd never been engaged in a fight for his life before, and hoped never to be again.

Oh? Is that so? a voice in his mind asked, dragging low like the physical sensation of ice cold fingers trailing down his spine.

Will's heart picked up in his chest and he looked wildly around himself, confirming he was alone. Just his imagination, then. Yet there was no point denying the implication; it came from within himself after all. The encounter had been terrifying but yes, it had also been thrilling. Had he ever in his life felt more alive than he had in that moment?

"You must love it," Will murmured out loud, speaking the words from memory, though it took him a moment to place them. His dream, just before the beast had attacked.

If Jack were here, he'd likely send Will home as soon as he was able to travel. He'd say Will was compromised, and besides, in his weakened state, what chance would he have against the vampire if there were to meet outside of his dreams? But then, until this evening, he never would have thought he'd stood any chance up against a beast like Tier, and still he'd emerged victorious.

Perhaps Jack underestimated him and Will had allowed that to colour his own perception of his abilities. Perhaps he was perfectly capable of handling the vampire as well.

Will refused to dwell on these thoughts. It was only a dream. He could never feel any sort of attachment to something as cruel and alien as this creature. Just as Hannibal had said, he could not expect to attribute human characteristics and emotion to something other than human, let alone love it.

No, he'd been spending so much time and energy on this hunt, it was inevitable that such thoughts invade his dreams. It certainly wasn't the first time he'd been disturbed by the things he saw in his sleep. Pushing it aside for now, Will took the laudanum. He sunk into the heavenly bed, nestled up in the sheets, and between the exhaustion and medication, fell quickly to sleep.

*

The dream that night was definitely not a nightmare. There was no maze of stone or wood, no unearthly creature pursuing him to his own coffin. No, this time he was once again swallowed in darkness, but it was different from the cool, calm dark afforded by the protection of the wax circle. This darkness hung heavy in the air about him, warm and sultry, glowing a molten red.

This dream was pure sensation--the solid weight of a body against his, pressing him into the sheets, holding him down. Skin as smooth and cold as marble sliding along Will's as they moved together. Each point of contact was another ember fanned to life, catching fire and lighting up his nerves. The only way to sooth the burn was to have those hands covering him entirely.

Will arched up to meet its mouth, soft and wet and tasting sweetly of red wine. He could not get enough of that flavour, oddly familiar with the lingering notes of copper. The vampire

licked Will's mouth open, sucked at his tongue, nipped oh-so-gently with his fangs--enough for Will to feel their deadly potential, but never enough to split the skin. Its kiss, much like its touch, was icy cold. Yet it set Will ablaze, coursing through his veins, settling hot and heavy in his gut.

They rolled together, the vampire's hardness leaking against Will's stomach; his own tucked exquisitely in the wide spread of its thighs, moist and slick from sweat and seminal fluid. His body knew how to move, though he had never experienced such a thing, had no idea how much better it could feel with another body. It was unlike any other dream or fantasy he'd had before--realer and more vibrant, and as certainly as he knew it to *be* a dream, he knew that the vampire was truly present there with him in this place.

There was no space between their joined lips and bodies, and Will's chest felt as though it might burst for want of oxygen until, quite suddenly, he no longer needed the air to breathe. He needed no more for his continued survival than to never leave this dark embrace. The vampire's hands seared the skin down his sides and over his hips and urged Will on faster. That long, muscular body writhed sensuously against him, and he was so, so close to finding his release.

"It could be like this always," the creature whispered, lips moving over Will's as it spoke. Will lifted his head, overtaken by and mindless in his desire, trying to catch its mouth in another kiss. It denied him, turning its cheek aside to nose along Will's jaw line. "I could show you pleasure you haven't even imagined."

Will whined in helpless longing. Though he knew this to be a dream, he was not naive enough to believe what happened here had no impact on the waking world. His body ached for completion even as his mind railed against this.

"Give yourself to me, Will."

"Why--" Will moaned, thought fleeing at the touch of sharp teeth to his neck. He swallowed hard, mind racing to string the words together. "Why haven't you simply taken what you want from me? If my defenses are no use against you? If you can invade my room and my mind?"

"Oh my dear." There was such overwhelming fondness in the vampire's voice, a tenderness in the fluttering hand pressed to Will's cheek. A swelling of emotion he'd previously assumed the creature incapable of possessing. It was dangerously intriguing. "You underestimate your own strength of mind," it said.

They kissed, Will sighing in satisfaction at having that mouth on him again. He lapped at the creature's lips for another taste of him. His fingers dug into the skin, hard under his hand but giving easily for the press of his nails.

"Give yourself to me." Teeth pressed bluntly against the swell of Will's lip. Long, nimble fingers tipped in claws drew down Will's length before closing around him.

"Knowingly." Its hand tightened around him and set up a punishing pace. It was dry, just on the wrong side of painful, but Will couldn't help but rock into it, quickly approaching climax.

“Willingly,” it purred, and circled the head of his prick with one sharp nail. Will spent himself, sobbing and unsated. He was still desperate for fangs sinking into his skin. So unlike Tier’s bite which was lacking in elegance and intimacy, he could almost anticipate the sensation of the vampire’s kiss.

As if it were reading his thoughts--and perhaps it was--the vampire chuckled, face pressed in the hollow of his throat. Every word spoken was a tease, lips and teeth brushing over vulnerable skin. “Give yourself to me,” it said again. “That is the only way I would have you.”

*

The curtains in Hannibal’s guest room were thick enough that no light seeped through them, for which Will was grateful. The dull ache in his head had blossomed into a sharp, persistent pain, worsened by any light.

When Hannibal came in with a tray for breakfast, he immediately perceived Will’s discomfort and turned out the electrical lighting, performing his examination by candlelight. He fussed over Will’s bandages and Will couldn’t keep his eyes open, which was probably for the best. He didn’t want to see what had become of his arm. Then Hannibal had given him a shot and more laudanum before telling him to rest and leaving him in blessed, darkened silence.

Though Will had no stomach for food, he gave in to Hannibal’s insistence and nibbled on the bread provided. It was a small, hard loaf, and given Hannibal’s skill in the kitchen, it was surprisingly bland. Or perhaps it was that Will could taste nothing over the lingering memory of the vampire’s blood rich kiss. Compared to that, the bread was like ash on his tongue. He still managed to choke down a few bites before giving into the undertow of exhaustion.

He slept again for hours, well past midday, only half-aware of Hannibal coming in again to check on him. Abigail brought him a tray of soup for lunch, which remained uneaten. Sometime in the late afternoon, there was a knock on his door, and when he managed to rouse himself and sit up from his cocoon of sheets, he found the pain in his head had mostly subsided.

“Come in,” he called, and had to clear his throat and try again. Thankfully, there was fresh water on the nightstand. He gulped it down, unaware of how thirsty he was until the first drop touched his tongue, and then unable to drink enough.

“Professor Graham.” It was Beverly, standing just inside the doorway, eyeing him nervously as though she expected him to leap from the bed and attack her. She bent at the waist to set his bag on the floor. “I wanted to bring your things, in case Doctor Lecter...well, it might be for the best that you stay here. The room at the inn--”

“Beverly, I’m so sorry.” Will struggled to set upright. He blinked several times, trying to make his eyes focus on her. “I’ll pay whatever you need to repair the damage.”

“Please.” Beverly stepped forward hesitantly, hand out. “Don’t sit up, you--there was a lot of blood. I tried to stop the bleeding as best I could. Thank God Doctor Lecter came so quickly.”

“I should be thanking you then, as well as apologising,” Will said.

“Neither is necessary.” Beverly took another step forward, then back, then finally strode across the room and sat in the chair at his bedside. “There are people in town blaming you,” she said.

Will’s brow furrowed, and the ache in his head started up again. “For Tier?” He finally managed to get himself upright, hissing at the pull in his shoulder.

“Yes. And Gintare, and then the professor. They quickly forget how mistrustful they were of Randall when he first arrived, or his strange, macbrae little museum, or all the unexplained deaths.

A deep sigh escaped Will’s lips and he rubbed at his eyes. Still they wouldn’t focus. Everything in the room was a blur, shaded in grey. “Tier killed Professor Poškus, and it was the vampire who got Gintare.”

“With no marks on her?” Beverly asked. Her eyes told Will she believed him, but she didn’t say as much. “And it was quite a number you did on Randall Tier.”

Will gestured to the bandage on his arm. “He was going to kill me,” he said, heat in his voice.

Beverly nodded quickly. “I know. I know. I was the one who found you both like that. I honestly couldn’t tell if you were alive at first. But his face--you--” She was pale, lips drawn tight. “I didn’t even recognise him, his face half caved in like that, and his eye put out.”

It was difficult to think through the pain and laudanum, and the lingering fog of sleep. He rubbed at his knuckles absently, prodding until he found the ache through the bandaging. Had he hit Tier in the face? His memory of last night was hazy, but he remembered the cage of bone he’d worn. Yet Hannibal and Beverly said it was Tier, not a beast. Was it possible that Will had seen Tier how he imagined himself, and not as he truly was?

Will shook his head. “I’m sorry you had to see that,” he said. “I wasn’t thinking clearly--I think I was still half-dreaming when he attacked.”

“I’m...not saying--I’m not blaming you, I’m *warning* you. It’s probably for the best that you stay here for now.” Beverly’s eyes were wide and sincere, lined in fear. “Not because you aren’t welcome at the inn, but because it’s safer for you here.”

She left him not long after, when he couldn’t keep his eyes open, despite his best effort. “I’m sure it will blow over,” she assured him. “But once you’re well enough, you might want to consider moving on.”

The next time he woke, he could tell it was late. There was dinner on bedside table, cold to the touch, and Hannibal sat in the chair, observing him with a strange, unreadable expression. Will watched back, their eyes meeting for a long moment, as he hovered between sleep and wakefulness, and was once again struck by the novelty of being alone in the silence of his mind.

Then Hannibal's eyes narrowed and seemed to darken, and Will thought perhaps that was intent that he saw. He rolled purposefully to the side, leaving a stretch of bed empty for Hannibal to occupy and flicked his gaze to it and back again.

Hannibal took the invitation, moving gracefully from the chair to sit with his back against the headboard. The bed was large enough that there was still a respectable distance between them, but Will felt the intimacy of it, nonetheless.

"How are you feeling?" Hannibal asked, hands clasped in his lap.

Will took a moment to actually assess before responding. There was a sort of woozy weakness, no doubt a combination of oversleeping and his continued fatigue as his body healed, and that wouldn't pass for a day or two.

"Better, I think," he said. "Honestly, my head was hurting so badly I could barely feel the pain in my arm, but the tea you brought earlier finally helped with that."

Hannibal reached out to run a hand over Will's forehead, brushing aside his hair. Will knew he must look an absolute wreck, his normally tame curls wild from sleep and sweat. He tilted his head back, encouraging the touch, and he was uncertain which of them was more surprised by that--but the feel of Hannibal's cool skin was such an absolute relief that Will actually sighed in pleasure before he could stop himself.

"That feels so nice," he said, dreamily, and let his eyes flutter closed when Hannibal drew the back of his hand along Will's temple and over his cheek. His breath caught and came out in a rush when Hannibal's fingers traced the shape of his upper lip. A bereft noise slipped loose from his throat when Hannibal's touch left him.

The mattress shifted as Hannibal stood, and Will couldn't bring himself to open his eyes, cheeks heating with embarrassment and disappointment. He heard Hannibal crossing the floor and entering the washroom, and the sound of the faucet running, then he returned and laid a cold washcloth over Will's forehead.

"It is only a mild fever," he murmured, "but there is no reason for you to suffer in discomfort."

Will swallowed back shame and fear and drew upon the memory of his dream of the vampire for boldness. "Your touch was comfort enough." The vampire wanted Will to give himself willingly, and that was a thing that would never happen. Maybe, just maybe if Will were to make it clear that he had chosen another...

"Dear Will," Hannibal said and Will's heart thrilled at the words. He was so very tired and Hannibal pressed his deliciously cool palm to Will's cheek. "The laudanum has made you delirious."

Will sighed. "Maybe." He leaned into the touch, eyes falling closed again as Hannibal's hand pushed into the curls at his temple. Carefully, Will leaned closer, and closer, tucking himself to Hannibal's side. After a moment, Hannibal brought his arm around Will's shoulders.

Maybe it was just the laudanum and the pain, and he would regret his behaviour in the morning. But Will couldn't recall the last time he'd been held by anyone at all. The last was probably his father's landlady, calming him after a nightmare, nearly two decades ago, and this felt so very right. Comfort he'd never sought out, had never allowed himself, thinking he didn't deserve it. How easy it was to accept from Hannibal...

Hannibal's lips ghosted over the crown of his head and his chin rested there briefly. Will kept expecting the puff of breath stirring his hair, but it never came. He fell asleep with Hannibal's fingers carding through his hair.

*

In the morning, he was able to make the trip to the bathroom with far less effort than the day before. He lacked the energy to bathe just yet, but used a washcloth to rinse the sweat and grime from his body. After, he managed to dress in a fresh night robe before he wore himself out.

There was another loaf of bread waiting at his bedside with a pot of tea. When Hannibal came in to see him awake, sitting up in bed and eating, he paused in the doorway. There was a hesitant expression on his face. Will couldn't be certain, but he wondered if it had anything to do with his own behaviour last night. "I'm glad to see you're feeling more yourself today."

Will set aside the bread, only a few bites taken from the loaf. "I'm sorry, I don't have much of an appetite."

Hannibal crossed the room. "An old remedy passed down through my family," he said. "It won't bruise my ego if you don't eat, but if you can get past the taste, the recipe will do you some good." Then, with an indulgent smile he added, "I promise a more flavourful dinner this evening, if you're up to it."

"That sounds nice," Will said, half-shy, half-embarrassed over what he'd said and done, smiling back cautiously. He picked up the bread again in his good hand and took another bite. It wasn't bad, just overly dry and bitter. When he washed it down, the cool tea rinsed the ashy feel from his tongue.

"Shall we have a look?" Hannibal's fingers were already working on the bandaging at his arm, and when Will gave a nod of approval, he began to unwrap them.

Yesterday he couldn't bring himself to look, but ignoring the damage would not make it go away. This time he watched as the bandage was unwound. Will let out a shallow breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding, when the wound was exposed. He stared in blank disbelief at what he saw.

Will had witnessed more than his fair share of injuries in his line of work, having seen the result of too many violent attacks. Even the best surgeons in New York and Washington DC couldn't work miracles. Gunshot wounds were the worst, the path of the bullet erratic and unpredictable--a shot in the side could ricochet off the rib and tear through the internal organs, or bits could break off, left to rot the victim from the inside out.

Knife wounds were generally more survivable, when the blade missed any vital organs or major arteries, when the surgeons were able to stitch up the wound in time. The end result was rarely pretty. Skin puckered red around the thread, pus and discharge, mottled skin. Animal attacks were even worse, whole chunks of skin torn clean off, exposing muscle and bone, and infection set in fast.

But this… Will could distinctly remember the sensation of his flesh tearing, shreds like ribbons hanging from his arm. The wrenching pain of having his arm ripped from the socket and having it dangle there uselessly at his side. In the end, it was barely attached any longer, nothing more than gristle holding him together.

Or at least, that was what he thought he'd seen and experienced. There was one long row of stitches along the line of his shoulder and down the outside of his arm and a half dozen or more smaller ones--one or two stitches at most, the puncture wounds from the teeth--scattered over his arm and high on his chest. The skin around his joint was a swollen purple and black, and there was some redness around the stitches, but certainly not what Will was expecting.

He ran his fingers over the skin just outside the longest wound, hissing at the sting of pain. It was nothing compared to what he'd been anticipating. "It thought it was worse," he whispered, then louder, "it should be worse, Hannibal, it should be--"

What was worse, losing his arm or losing his mind?

The look Hannibal gave him was grim. "Trust me, it is bad enough. You can be thankful that I was able to clean the wound almost immediately--who knows what remained on the skull from Tier's previous attacks--but until you have healed entirely, you run the risk of infection. I wish there was more I could have done."

"You don't understand." Will pinched the skin roughly, turning his arm this way and that, looking for more damage. His shoulder screamed in protest, and his head suddenly felt like it was splitting open, the pain fresh and new again.

Hannibal reached out gingerly, removing Will's hand from his arm and holding it away. "Will--"

"It wasn't some animal skull, it was the beast, Hannibal. Easily nine feet tall. The face was like that of the sketch of the cave bear, only larger, with teeth forged from iron, and a mask of carved bone."

Will stopped struggling against Hannibal's hold, and let his hand fall limp back to the bed. Hannibal studied him, expression shrewd. Will had no idea what he was thinking, and for the first time in their acquaintance, it disturbed him.

At last, Hannibal turned his attention back to Will's wounds. He spread an unctuous ointment over each with a gentle touch, and at length he spoke. "Poškus' research partner arrived this morning to return his body home. Poškus was an experimental psychologist at Leipzig when Tier was a young man. When he read about the recent attacks, he remembered a similar case in Germany, from around that time.

“Tier believed himself to be one of the creatures he studied, and Poškus suspected he was using the excavated remains of the cave bear in his attacks. He sent a letter to the constable which was apparently lost along the way, and after he read about the incident a few days ago, assuming it was connected, he decided to take it upon himself to deliver the news in person.”

“No,” Will said softly.

“Randall Tier was a very sick man, Will, but only a man.”

“Hannibal.” It was foolish, but he felt as though he’d been betrayed. “No, the wounds--the bite marks--”

“The contraption that he built was quite impressive,” Hannibal said. “Compressed helical springs in the jaw allowed it to snap closed with incredible of force and complex pneumatics afforded him inhuman strength. It is a shame he was so troubled--a mind such as his was capable of great things.”

“I *saw* it,” Will protested. It sounded weak, even to his own ears, when he meant for it to come out forcefully. More questioning than insistent.

“You were asleep when he attacked, your mind has been occupied with thoughts of the vampire.” Hannibal’s voice was as gentle as his hands, soothing Will’s frazzled nerves as he rewrapped his wounds in fresh bandages, careful not to jostle him. “Not everything has a supernatural explanation.”

“If the vampire is real, it stands to reason there are other creatures like it,” Will said.

Hannibal inclined his head thoughtfully. “Perhaps, but Randall Tier was not one of them. He was a pretender, at best.” His eyes were cold and disdainful, and it wasn’t until seeing it, and feeling a strange incongruity, that Will realised he’d never seen Hannibal in any mood other than pleasant and agreeable.

It was jarring, to say the least. Troubling. But Will couldn’t think about that when his mind was wandering now, questioning what he’d seen and believed to be the truth. He’d taken what he’d seen of the vampire in his dreams and visions to be the reality of the thing, but what if it was only his perception?

Was it possible the vampire was somewhere in town, parading as a human being, right before his eyes? And if that were the case, how could he trust anything he’d gleaned from his research? This vampire knew Will intimately--knew his motivations, his longings and desires, the things he was too afraid to admit to himself in the light of day. And now, Will realised, he knew nothing of the vampire at all.

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know, it's like the chapter count increases every time I post, but this chapter was already 6k, and there's still at least another 4k to go from this point. I debated whether or not to post now or just wait and post one super long chapter later, but in the end, this is the route I decided to take.

Seize the Night

Chapter Notes

> So much thanks to yodalicious for suggesting this in the first place and letting me ramble about the plot when I'm floundering, to theglintoftherail for helping work through some issues I was having and getting me back on the correct path, and sherlocks-freebitch for holding my hand all the way, helping me keep up momentum, and reassuring me that this isn't utter shite, and just being generally awesome. You all rock so much, and this chapter is better for it :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There wasn’t enough pain to justify another dose of laudanum. Despite Hannibal’s insistence that it would be fine, Will turned him down. He’d seen too many men and women ruined by an addiction to the narcotic. Without the soporific effect of opiate, sleep was elusive. Hannibal had insisted on a nap if Will wished to come downstairs for dinner, but Will’s mind was occupied with thoughts of Randall Tier and, inevitably, the subject of his dreams.

To be perfectly honest, the idea of another visit from the vampire in his sleep was enough to keep Will awake. Between his visitors and his drugged sleep, he hadn’t had a lot of time to dwell on what the vampire said. The...invitation extended to Will the last time it had intruded upon his dream now demanded his attention.

Will could still feel the phantom touch of the vampire’s skin against his own and it made him shiver with desire. It wasn’t his intention, but he felt himself growing aroused. He rolled onto his side, cheeks flushing in shame, and forced himself to focus on what was said, rather than what was felt.

Since that fateful night when Tier attacked, the words they’d exchanged rattled in Will’s skull. He’d tried ignoring them, and failing that, he’d tried denying them, but it was no use. Will could lie to Jack and Alana about the extent to which his work affected him, but he couldn’t lie to himself.

As much as he liked to profess disgust over what he saw when he looked at the vampire’s work and let himself slip into that mindset, the truth was, it was comforting. Sinking into that deep, icy hold was such a relief. All the tension built up in his daily life melted away. All the sickening self-loathing gave way to a supremely confident self-satisfaction.

It was dangerously alluring, and Will fought against it, every time. He couldn’t allow himself to linger in the mindset, fearing that if he stayed too long, it would be too difficult to rein himself back in. Jack worried this work might destroy him, but he didn’t fully understand in what way. Will wasn’t afraid of giving into the vampire’s seduction because he was horrified by it. He was afraid of giving in because of how much he wanted it.

Will could not allow himself, even for a moment, to envision what it would be like to surrender to the vampire. Any pleasure to be had in the vampire's embrace was only sensual. Despite what it said, their connection was not worth betraying the people he cared about. It wasn't worth losing Jack...or Hannibal, for that matter. In this, Will was resolute.

Eventually, he managed to doze for a while, and woke feeling groggy when Abigail came in to tend to the fire. For the first time, it struck Will that Hannibal didn't staff a housekeeper. Hannibal's work kept him busy, and he was a wealthy man. As grand as the house was, it made no sense for him to tend to it himself, with only Abigail's help.

Abigail stood from her crouch, as the fire roared back to life, and stopped when she saw him watching. "I didn't mean to wake you."

Will shook his head, pushing himself up one-armed to sit with his back resting against the headboard. "What time is it?"

"Close to seven," Abigail said, tugging at her skirt in a clearly nervous gesture. She looked torn between leaving and coming closer. Finally the latter won out, and she came to stand by his bedside. "How are you feeling?"

Will gave her a lopsided smile. "Disoriented. Though not in nearly as much pain as I'd have anticipated."

Abigail gave him a hesitant smile. "Hannibal is very good at what he does," she said. There was something queer about her tone, and she didn't look Will in the face, picking instead at the pattern of her bodice. "I guess we're both proof of that."

"I guess so," Will said. He studied her face, trying to tease out what it was that caused her discomfort. There was *fear* beating timidly in her chest, but when she met Will's gaze, she smiled. It was a brittle thing.

"Will you be joining us for dinner?" she asked. Fear, and anxiety, in the flick of her eyes away from Will, towards the door, and back again. In the twitch of her skirt in her hands, and her lips pressed white together.

"Any excuse to get out of bed," Will said. He sat up straighter, leaning toward her. "Abigail--" He reached a hand out, and she danced back a step.

"I'll set an extra place, and let Hannibal know you're joining us," Abigail said, and ducked out the door. "Dinner will be at seven-thirty."

Maybe she was wary of him after what he'd done to Tier. He couldn't blame her, if that was the case, though he sincerely hoped it wasn't. Like Hannibal, Abigail had found her way past his armour effortlessly. Already he found himself caring for her happiness and well-being. He'd hate to think she was afraid of him. That she saw the violence of which he was capable, and thought of the violence her father had visited upon her.

But no, Abigail wasn't afraid *of* him, he didn't think. Afraid for him, perhaps? Uncertain of his prognosis? Will's body felt heavy, his head groggy, still half-asleep. At this particular

moment, he couldn't really process Abigail's behaviour, let alone try to delve into what might have prompted it.

With less effort than previously, Will rose from bed and made his way to the bathroom. Having never been injured so grievously, he had no basis for comparison, but the healing process seemed to be taking far less time than it should. He wasn't pain free, but he felt less like he'd been attacked and more like he'd slept the wrong way and strained his muscles.

Will looked at himself in the mirror, studying his reflection. The bruising on his cheek and neck had faded to a dull, greenish yellow. It made absolutely no sense, and Will could not help but recall the stories in Jack's notes, of the restorative powers of a vampire's blood.

But no. Even in the dreams, the vampire had so purposefully refrained from drawing Will's blood, or giving his own. He was being paranoid. He washed his face and ran his wet fingers through his hair, coaxing it to lie flat against his face. Once he dressed, the damage would hardly be noticeable.

A phonograph was playing in the drawing room, when Will descended the stairs. Something Baroque. Handel, he thought. It was cheerful and triumphant, and warmed the place as effectively as the golden glow of the candles and the fire in the hearth. All the same, a cloud hung about Will. Slowly creeping upon him since his dream the night Tier attacked, and growing steadily darker and stronger since, only intensified by whatever it was he'd sensed from Abigail.

The room was empty, as was the dining room. Will felt like an interloper, moving through the home as though he lived there. He could hear voices from the kitchen. Hannibal's deep, soothing tones, and Abigail's softer, concerned murmurs. He couldn't quite make out what they were saying, and made sure to make plenty of sound as he approaching, so they wouldn't think he was trying to listen in.

Hannibal smiled at him as he came into the room, and it sparked some wisp of a memory Will couldn't quite hold onto. It settled uncomfortably in his chest, and he found himself incapable of returning the smile. He feared it would be more of a grimace.

"I'm glad to see you up and about," Hannibal said, coming to loop an arm through Will's uninjured one. "Dinner is nearly ready. You should have a seat, you don't want to overextend yourself."

Will allowed himself to be led back into the dining room, though he couldn't help but notice the way Abigail hung her head, hiding behind her fall of hair, toying with her knife. "I didn't know what you would like," Hannibal was saying, "but after recalling our discussion of your fondness for fly fishing, I thought a flounder would not go amiss."

"If the meals I've taken in your home thus far are any indication, I'm certain it will be delicious," Will murmured. He was distracted by the way Hannibal's hand lingered on his good shoulder, after he'd taken his seat, fingers brushing down his sleeve before he stepped away entirely.

Unbidden, thoughts of his dream resurfaced, and the idea that he'd had, of making himself unavailable to the vampire's advances. Everything Hannibal had said and done could be taken innocently enough. There had been no single action on his part to indicate romantic interest, but when Will looked at them altogether, it became inescapable. It was unlikely that anyone else would notice, but then again, no one else saw things the same way Will did.

"Will?" Hannibal's eyes darted over his face. Will wondered what it was he saw, without the benefit of Will's insight. If he had any inkling what it was Will was considering. "Are you certain you're up to this?"

Will swallowed an uneasy chuckle. Certainly Hannibal could realise the implications of the question he asked. "I'm just relieved to get out of bed. And given the circumstances, I think I'm doing well. Better than."

"I'm glad to hear it. I am unused to having a friend for a patient." Hannibal favoured him with a rueful smile. "I must admit, I prefer you as the former."

"As do I." Will directed his words at the plate.

Hannibal served the fish, along with boiled new potatoes and roasted vegetables. It all smelled divine, particularly after the bread he'd been dining on. Will's appetite was voracious, and he cleared his plate probably more quickly than was polite. Hannibal didn't comment, but gave him a second serving.

Conversation was oddly strained, likely thanks to Abigail's mood. By the time they were finished, her anxiety had leeched into Will, as powerful as it was. Even after she excused herself, and he was left alone with Hannibal, Will could not shake the feeling.

The two of them made their way to Hannibal's study, as was becoming routine now. Will allowed himself a moment, as he settled in his usual chair and Hannibal went to get the coffee, to imagine what it would be like to do this every evening. To dine on Hannibal's delicious cooking in his company and Abigail's. To drink his fill of heady wine and rich coffee while Abigail sang and Hannibal played, or while he and Hannibal talked, or perhaps reading from Hannibal's impressive library.

It was a foolish notion, even casting aside the social stigma--supposing that he hadn't mistaken Hannibal's interest. What would he do without his work? There was little chance the Russian soldiers would want an American skulking around crime scenes. They barely tolerated him now, and only at Hannibal's insistence. Will didn't speak the languages here. He would have nothing to contribute. Supposing that Hannibal were infatuated with him, he would quickly grow bored with Will once he realised his empathy was more of a burden than a blessing, in everyday life.

That awakening, coupled with his tension and anxiety had soured his attitude by the time Hannibal returned. Hannibal must have noticed, freezing when he saw Will's expression, and approaching cautiously, as if Will were some wild animal. Will scowled and looked instead at the fire.

"Has your pain increased?" Hannibal asked, wary as he passed Will his cup.

Will forced himself to take it carefully, and not just snatch it away. Hannibal wasn't to blame for his foul mood. "Have I done something--" he stopped, and considered how he wanted to phrase his question. "Beverly Zeller told me the townspeople are suspicious of me. That they think I'm somehow responsible for the deaths that have occurred since I came to town, after what happened with Tier."

"As you have pointed out on more than one occasion, the people of this town are neither learned, nor particularly astute," Hannibal said. There was a thread of disdain in his normally kind, placid demeanour. "They would rather blame an outsider than have to face the fact that the killer was their neighbour all along."

"I'm not concerned with the townspeople's opinion of me," Will snapped. "I could not help but notice Abigail's distance at dinner. She was *afraid*."

"Ah." Hannibal leaned back in his chair and took a sip of his coffee before speaking. "I can assure you that Abigail does not blame you for any of the recent deaths. Not even, I imagine, Mister Tier's. Any reasonable person would recognise the fact that you were acting in self-defence, and took his life only to save your own."

"She might say that she does not, but it is difficult to be rational about fear," Will said. "Especially for someone so young."

"Abigail is young," Hannibal agreed. "She has been through great deal of trauma in her short life, and she has come out the stronger for it."

Will swallowed his first mouthful of coffee. The rich flavour blossomed on his tongue. He thought he would miss Hannibal's coffee the most. He rested the rim of the cup against his lip, watching the steam rise and the surface ripple with the vibration of his voice as he spoke. "If it wasn't me that she was afraid of," he asked, still surly, "then what was it that caused her so much distress this evening?"

"She is very sensitive, in her own way," Hannibal said. "I believe she is worried for your well-being."

Will's brow furrowed. "I'm better. I'll be fine, thanks to you."

"You survived your encounter with Tier, but he was only a man." Hannibal paused, as if waiting for Will to contradict him again, but he did not. Will still didn't know what happened in his room that--maybe he never would, but there was no use arguing the point.

Will pulled a face of distaste, swallowing too quickly from his cup. It burned on the way down. "I suppose it was too much to hope that Abigail discount the rumours of the vampire as only that."

"She is a bright young woman," Hannibal said, "and I have made no effort to hide what it is we have been researching from her."

"Yes, well, she's been through enough in her life, as you said. She shouldn't have to concern herself with nightmare creatures."

“Abigail might argue that what she experienced both when her father cut her throat, and in the aftermath, has adequately equipped her to face such nightmares,” Hannibal mused.

Will snorted. “Is that your belief?”

“I believe that the depth of depravity of which man is capable is breathtaking. And I know that you, more than most, are in a unique position to truly appreciate that fact,” Hannibal said. Will tipped his head in acquiescence.

Hannibal sat aside his coffee cup and leaned forward, elbows braced on his knees. “We discussed your difficulty in assigning human emotion to a creature such as the vampire. You spoke of his desire to create as his motivation for the crimes he has committed. I would argue that there are human beings who are far less deserving of your empathy. Men and women whose only desire is to destroy everything good and beautiful in this world.”

“Doctor Lecter, are you advocating on behalf of the vampire?” Will hoped his expression conveyed how truly unimpressed he was.

“Merely putting things into perspective,” Hannibal said. “Perhaps for Abigail, Garrett Jacob Hobbs *was* the creature of her nightmares.”

Will levelled a belligerent glare in his direction. “You’re the one who said she was afraid for my well-being.”

“You are the one who made that assumption it was the vampire of which she was afraid.” His tone was soothing, but Will had no desire to be soothed this evening.

If she wasn’t afraid of Will, and she wasn’t afraid of the vampire, what was left?

The fire flickered in his peripheral vision. There was something teasing in the back of his mind, like the ghost of fingertips brushing up his spine. It wasn’t anything to do with Abigail at all. No matter how Will tried to distract himself with the mystery of Abigail’s mood, no matter how surly he was with Hannibal, it didn’t change the dilemma he faced.

Will exhaled, a long, drawn out sigh. There was none of the usual associated lessening of the tension held tight in the line of his back and shoulders. He leaned forward, mirroring Hannibal’s posture. “I’ve been dreaming of the vampire.”

Hannibal didn’t respond at once, but he made a soft noise that seemed to indicate sudden understanding. He pressed his index finger against his pursed lips in thought, and Will allowed himself to wonder what it would be like to kiss the plush curve of that generous mouth. He licked his own lips, in unconscious reflex.

“Interesting choice of word,” Hannibal mused, at length. “Dream, rather than nightmare.”

Will swallowed, nodding his head. “Are we going to discuss semantics now?” Immediately, he felt contrite. “No, you’re right. Damn,” he hissed, and dragged his hand down his face. “I’m sorry, I can’t--I’ve been trying, but I just can’t seem to banish the dreams, even during my waking hours.”

“It has been an eventful week for you, Will. You have taxed yourself both physically and emotionally, to say nothing of the injuries you suffered at the hands of Randall Tier. It comes as little surprise that you are incapable to avoiding this mental onslaught.”

Hannibal’s words were reasonable, and tone remained so calm and even, despite Will’s antagonism. In part, it spurred on his aggression and made him want to pick a fight. Will had brought up the dreams with a very specific goal in mind; he couldn’t allow himself to be distracted by giving into this irrational frustration roiling under his skin. He dragged in another deep breath and let it out.

“That’s not the issue,” Will said, and then caught himself. “Certainly the situation hasn’t been helped by all that has happened recently, but as you know, my work has led me to many dark places before now. This is different.”

Will could almost taste Hannibal’s intrigue now, as he shifted in his seat. “Tell me,” Hannibal said.

“I’ve had nightmares all my life. As long as I can remember.” Will twisted his coffee cup in its saucer. “I learned when I was fairly young that drinking until I was insensate often kept the nightmares at bay. It was not a surefire solution, and even I was not self-destructive enough to make a habit of it…”

Aware he was fidgeting with his cup, Will put it down with more force than he’d intended. He stared at his hands. “I am familiar with nightmares. When the vampire visits me in my sleep, those are not nightmares,” he breathed.

“Are they not frightening?”

“What is frightening is my response to them.” Will forced himself to meet Hannibal’s keen gaze then, and swallowed back his fear. “The...desire that I feel, the *longing* to accept what it has offered.”

Will’s voice broke on the words, and his cheeks heated, particularly as he read Hannibal’s reaction as it spread across his features. The red glint in his eyes as they dilated, roving over Will’s face, the faint exhalation between his lips, parted just slightly. “What did he offer you, Will?”

“I don’t--” Will shook his head firmly. “It doesn’t matter. I’m not *going* to accept it.” He gathered all his courage, heart aching in his throat as he considered what he was about to confess. If he was wrong, if he had misread Hannibal’s interest, this could be an end to their friendship. The thought almost kept him from speaking.

While there remained the chance that Hannibal might feel the same as Will, he could not remain silent. No matter how slight the sliver of hope, that they could somehow have something more than a fleeting, stolen moment in time, Will would latch onto it.

Will cleared his throat and pushed himself to his feet, going to stand before the fireplace. “That temptation--that desire--pales in comparison to what I feel for you,” he confessed.

Silence fell in the wake of Will's declaration. He bowed his head, awaiting Hannibal's response, staring resolutely at the flickering flames. Behind him, he heard Hannibal rise, and the whisper of fabric as he moved, coming closer. Will's shoulders drew tight with anxiety.

Hannibal did not touch him, nor did he speak right away. Instead, he came to stand next to Will, shoulders nearly brushing, head bowed. His hands flexed at his sides before he pushed them into his pocket. "I must ask what it is you hope to achieve in telling me this, before I react."

Will risked a sideways glance. There was no mistaking the heat in Hannibal's eyes. Will's pulse began to race, and an answering heat flared in his chest, making it difficult to breathe. Hannibal arched a brow. "Do you wish to resist this temptation, as well?"

Will shook his head, the barest twitch of motion side to side, and whispered, "No."

Hannibal lifted his hand slowly, making a show of it. Will held perfectly still, but he couldn't help the way his eyelids fluttered in pleasure when Hannibal cupped his cheek. His touch was a cool contrast to radiant heat of the fire all along Will's front, and the blush under his skin. He pressed into it, stepping closer the same moment Hannibal ducked his head, bringing their mouths together.

Though it was a gentle, chaste kiss, that first fleeting brush of skin was enough to set Will's nerves alight, quickening the need within. Will couldn't stifle a moan, finally being given that which he desired. The sound sparked something within Hannibal. He brought his free hand up to rest on Will's hip, the fabric of Will's trousers bunching under his grip, and crowded closer, until their chests met.

Will's own hands were shaking as he brought them up to rest tentatively on Hannibal's shoulders. Already this was different than that one, stolen kiss with Alana, tender, sweet, and sad. Hannibal's touch, though softer and warmer, filled him with that fierce hunger, not unlike the touch of the vampire. Rather than feeling satisfied with the kiss, he was inflamed by it. He parted his mouth, uncertain but bold, and wanting, and Hannibal gave. His hand sank into Will's hair, and with a rough tug, he angled him so their lips could meet more fully.

They slotted together as if they'd been made for just this purpose. When Hannibal licked into him, Will shivered and arched his back, moaning again helplessly. It was even more intense than in his hazy, half-remembered dreams. Bright and sharp, Will was aware of every place they touched, of Hannibal's nails drawing across his scalp, sending sparks of delight down his spine, of the way Hannibal's tongue tickled along the roof of his mouth. Such fascinating, intoxicating sensations he'd never considered, but made his cock rise and fill with startling rapidity.

Hannibal's hand smoothed around his side to splay flat against the small of his back. With the lightest pressure, he urged Will closer, that last little distance, until Will could feel Hannibal's own arousal, insistent against his hip. Will's lungs burned, and he pulled away, just enough to gasp for air, forehead pressed to Hannibal's.

Even in this moment, the proof of his desire between them, Hannibal remained as collected as always. While Will dragged in great, gulping breaths, Hannibal was still and calm against

him, plucking kisses down Will's cheek and along his jaw. Will trembled and lifted his chin to bare his throat, and again, Hannibal understood what Will was too embarrassed to ask for. He dragged the tip of his tongue over Will's pulse, and down the curve of his throat.

"I cannot tell you how relieved I am," Hannibal murmured, nosing at Will's collar. There was far too much clothing between them, and it was only then that Will remembered they were in the parlour. He tried to draw back, but Hannibal's grip tightened, holding him firm.

"Relieved?" Will echoed. All higher brain function had suspended at Hannibal's touch, all thought fled. Now he struggled to find the thread of their conversation.

Hannibal hummed in agreement. He brought his hand between them, easily slipping the first button of Will's shirt free from it's hole, and parting the shirt to his exploration. A deep, sucking kiss at the hollow of his throat left Will light-headed and clinging to Hannibal for balance. He was so hot with lust, he thought he might suffocate in it.

"You don't realise how singularly remarkable you are, dear boy." The hair at the back of Will's neck stood on end at the timbre of Hannibal's voice, a purely animal response. Hannibal straightened, looking him in the eye, and his hand curved around Will's throat, gentle but restraining. "You don't realise how difficult it has been to restrain myself."

Will was trapped by Hannibal's gaze, unable to move, as a cold wave of understanding swept over him, and quick on it's heels, dawning horror. "No," he whispered.

Hannibal's lips quirked up at one side. His hand tightened briefly, not enough to cut off the flow of oxygen, but enough to cause discomfort. He leaned in to brush their lips together again, thumb sweeping over Will's racing pulse. "I had thought myself at a crossroads concerning you, but now I see the paths I'd once thought were divergent bring us together, in the end."

"*No*," Will cried weakly. It *could not be*. He closed his eyes tightly, hoping to open them again to find this all to be a dream.

Now that the pieces were coming together, Will couldn't believe he'd failed to see the truth before. Could he excuse it as anything other than his own subconscious refusal to accept that Hannibal and the vampire were one and the same? The perpetual chill to Hannibal's skin, the glint of red in his eyes. And how could he have missed the lack of pulse, or the way Hannibal's chest failed to rise and fall with breath? Will's accelerated healing after receiving a transfusion from him...

"Oh god." Hannibal's blood was already inside him. It should have caused him to panic, but all Will could muster was a pang of disappointment.

"Would you feign horror now?" Hannibal teased. His hand circled around the back of Will's neck, touch rough and possessive. Will's body was far ahead of his thoughts; his gut lurched pleasantly.

Hannibal grinned smugly as though he knew precisely what Will was feeling. He leaned in to mouth at Will's throat. Instinct screamed for him to run, yet Will found himself frozen to the

spot, spine tingling in anticipation of the sharp bite of his fangs. Still, it did not come. Hannibal's kisses were exceedingly, maddeningly gentle.

"Now that you've confessed how you long to give yourself to me." His voice rumbled against Will's skin and through his chest.

Will exhaled shakily. "You said you wanted me knowingly and willingly." It came out far breathier than he would have preferred.

"Nothing I have done to you is permanent," Hannibal said. His pursed lips teased out a spot behind Will's ear that made him shudder in delight. Will's hands, pressed flat to Hannibal's chest in protest, now curled in the lapel of his jacket. "Yet."

"As if you would have let me go," Will hissed.

"Turning you without your consent holds no appeal for me," Hannibal said. "As beautiful as I am certain your agony would be."

"But," Hannibal continued, sliding a leg between Will's and grinding upwards against his erection, "you have professed your willingness, and--" He caught Will's gasping mouth in another kiss, and Will opened to him, hunger unabated by his knowledge of Hannibal's true nature. "Here you remain, within my embrace."

Will's gaze darted from Hannibal's eyes to the door, and back again. "How far would I get, if I were to run?"

Hannibal petted back the curls from Will's forehead, expression fond. "I must admit, when you first knocked upon my door, it was my intention to toy with you and then to kill you, but no longer. You are far too exquisite to be discarded in that way." He took Will's mouth again in a quick, demanding kiss and Will clung to him, twining his arms around Hannibal's neck, pulling him nearer and holding tight.

"So leave now, Will," Hannibal murmured. "I will be gone on the morrow, and you will hear no more of me." He laid a kiss against the corner of Will's mouth, the bow of his upper lip. "Or tell me again." His teeth pressed into the swell of his bottom lip, and for the first time, Will felt the promise of his fangs. "Tell me."

Will's eyes fell closed. He sank deep within himself, expecting weary resignation. He'd known that what he felt for Hannibal was doomed to fail, but he'd hoped that perhaps they could share in their connection, if only for a brief time. But instead, there was a fragile, tremulous joy buoying up inside, threatening to burst free.

That he could have the creature, who understood him so completely, and offered freedom from the torment of his nightmares, who encouraged Will to indulge in all his darkest fantasies. And he could have the man, who touched him with such ardour and gazed on him with such affection, who put him at ease in his own skin.

Will nodded jerkily. "Yes," he breathed. He opened his eyes, locking onto Hannibal's, which watched him with satisfied expectation. His grin had softened into something tender as he

awaited Will's decision. "I want it. I want you, Hannibal. All of you."

The words were barely past his lips and Hannibal's hand tightened, jerking Will forward to crush their mouths together. Will responded eagerly, licking inexpertly at Hannibal's lips. His tongue caught on the tip of one fang and the taste of copper blossomed between them. Hannibal growled, an inhuman sound that Will felt all the way down to his toes, and sucked Will's tongue into his mouth, drawing on the blood.

Hannibal pulled at Will's clothing in search of bare skin. No longer tentative or careful, he shoved Will's shirt up, touch cold against Will's stomach, and tore at the fastenings of his trousers. Will bucked his hips upward, cock nudging Hannibal's wrist. He was so desperate for the touch, he would beg, if Hannibal would stop kissing him long enough to let him draw a lungful of air. But he didn't need to--the fabric gave, splitting open, ruined, and Will didn't care. Hannibal's hand slipped inside his shorts and closed around him.

Will whined in relief, clutching handfuls of Hannibal's jacket, and thrust upward into his hold. There was a dull ache in his tongue, where the bleeding had stopped, and Will scraped it over the fang again, harder. Hannibal's grip tightened in response, squeezing on the upstroke--he couldn't say if it was more pleasure or pain, but Will's body processed it the same way.

"I admire your enthusiasm," Hannibal said, "but we'll get to that soon enough. I have longed to taste you, Will."

It took a moment for Will to understand what he meant, but once Hannibal crowded him backwards against the wall and fell to his knees, it became clear. "Oh," he said dumbly, watching as Hannibal shoved his trousers and shorts down around his thighs and leaned in to draw the tip of his tongue against the head of his cock.

"*Oh*!" Will's knees trembled. His hands landed in Hannibal's silky hair, holding on for dear life when Hannibal opened his mouth around him. It was the most intense pleasure he'd ever known--the cool, wet pressure surrounding him, sucking him in. "Yes," he groaned, "Oh, yes, please."

Hannibal chuckled, and the sensation made Will thrust deeper. Hannibal's throat was tight around his cock, his tongue drawing up the underside, pressing hard and flat. He drew back, releasing Will from his mouth, to lip kisses down the length of him. "This is only the beginning, my love," he said. He wrapped his hand around Will's prick and eased back the foreskin, suckling at the exposed head. "I will give you so much pleasure, you'll weep, and beg for me to stop."

Will's fingers tightened in his hair and he tilted his hips forward, nudging against Hannibal's lips. He swallowed back the tide of panic and disbelief, and held on to tether of blinding need binding them together. "Please," he said again, more softly. "I want it."

Hannibal kept his eyes fixed on Will's as he took his cock in his mouth again. His cheeks hollowed out around Will's prick, sucking and swallowing relentlessly, tearing Will's orgasm from him. Will could not look, biting down hard on his lip to keep from crying out, but there

was no stopping the sound that rose up from his chest like a sob, as he spent himself on Hannibal's tongue.

It was too much, and still not enough. Will craved more, even now. Hannibal swallowed his release and smiled up at him, pleased. His lips skimmed over the curve of Will's thigh, barely brushing skin and Will gave a tug to his hair. "I've been waiting for you to take me," he whispered. "Why won't you take me, Hannibal?"

Sudden, lancing pain shot through his groin, Hannibal's teeth slicing neatly through skin. Will only saw the briefest flash of glistening fangs before Hannibal was bowing his head to lick up the trickle of blood he'd drawn. Will caught him by the jaw and tilted his head back, angling his face upward, and Hannibal offered no resistance. His pupils were blown wide, as if drugged, and it struck Will that it was the taste of him--his blood and release--that had Hannibal looking so undone. It was a feeling of heady power and something bordering on terror.

"Let me," Will said, pushing down on Hannibal's bottom lip with his thumb, urging him to open his mouth. Hannibal parted his lips, and all Will could see were the rows of perfectly normal white teeth. "Show me?"

"I'll show you everything," Hannibal promised.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, yes, I'm adding another chapter, *sigh* It was not my intention, and honestly I could finish the whole thing in one chapter, but you'd have to wait longer for it (this weekend is my wife's birthday, and our 13th anniversary is coming up in a couple of weeks), and people are already getting impatient. So. Yes. Another chapter. That's basically nothing but porn (I've written part of it already :D)

On the subject of impatience, I appreciate the enthusiasm for my writing more than I can say, but trust that I am always working as quickly as I am able to bring more fic to you guys. In between chapters, I work on chapters of A Great and Gruesome Height, and a lot of oneshots--all while also caring for my toddler and keeping house, and dealing with some pain issues that make it difficult to move my arm. You'd be surprised how much involvement there is in your shoulder joint when you type!! I also write on a mostly useless computer that regularly gives me the BSOD and takes anywhere from 15 minutes to 2 hours for me to get it in working condition again, and sometimes it does this REPEATEDLY, all day long (like yesterday, sigh, when I went to a play café specifically to finish this chapter, only to spend 3 hours fighting with my computer and only being able to write about 3 paragraphs :/)

The point is, I love you guys, and I love your comments and encouragement, but sometimes it gets stressful when I'm already working hard to get the next chapter out as quickly as I'm able. You can always check on my tumblr: http://moku-youbi.tumblr.com/

for status updates, which I usually post at least once a week, and to be assured that I haven't abandoned a fic.

tl;dr, hang in there with me, the next chapter WILL be the last, and is coming, I promise. I ♥ you guys!

And Curse the Light of Day

Chapter Notes

unbeta'd but I wanted to get this out tonight. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal moved quickly, standing and lifting Will into his arms, like a bride on her wedding day. Will was fully aware of the implications and embraced them eagerly. There was no sign of strain in Hannibal at all, carrying him effortlessly. Will clung to him, tucking his face in the curve of his throat. His fingers got caught up in the tangle of hair at the base of Hannibal's neck, and he pulled on the cord that held it in place. It was longer than Will had realised, cleverly tucked beneath his collar, now spilling in soft waves around his shoulders and down his back.

Even after having Hannibal's mouth on his prick, Will's heart raced with anxiety as he considered running his fingers through that finely textured hair, and kissing the pale skin beneath his lips. Hannibal made the sweetest sound of surprised pleasure when Will finally gave in and did just that. It was nothing like in his dream--Hannibal's skin was soft and supple, cool but not icy cold. His hair was like spun silk. How could Will reconcile the fact that this man was the thing from his dream, when he handled Will with such care?

The bedroom was lit only by the fireplace, casting dancing shadows across the room. Hannibal laid Will down on his bed, brushing a chaste kiss over his lips before standing back to undress. Will watched with avid interest as Hannibal discarded his jacket and tie and pushed his suspenders from his shoulders. He stepped from his trousers and set to work on the buttons of his shirt, baring more and more pale, marble-smooth skin.

Will sat up and reached out to touch, hand flat against Hannibal's sternum. Now that he knew what was missing, he could feel nothing else. It was disconcerting, how still Hannibal's chest was beneath his touch. No rise and fall with breath, no heart beating against his palm. Hannibal allowed Will his halting exploration, standing still as Will pushed the shirt from his shoulders and let it fall to the floor. Will got to his knees, putting them at the same height, and leaned in for a kiss. Hannibal hummed his appreciative consent as Will lapped at the seam of his mouth.

All Will's hesitance in his exploration fled at the touch of their lips together. Beneath Will's hands, Hannibal's body was all lean, graceful lines and faintly defined muscles. Hannibal had a dancer's body, and Will was gripped with a sudden fierce curiosity to know more about where Hannibal came from, and when. Who had he been, before? What had left this long, thin scar down his side, or this one over his collarbone?

Will wanted to see and know and experience it all. He broke their kiss to look more closely at the raised, knotted flesh under his fingers. Unthinking, he bent his head to press a kiss there. Hannibal's hand came up to cradle the base of his skull, fingers toying through his curls. It was unexpected, how pleasant that simple sensation was. Will pressed into the touch and raised his eyes to Hannibal's, questioning.

"A spear tip broke off in the wound," Hannibal explained, covering Will's fingers with his own. His hair, catching gold in the firelight, framed the sharp angles of his face, softening them. "The healer had to dig it out." He brought their joint hands to the scar on his side. "Another barbarian's spear. A dagger." At this, he trailed Will's fingers over the raised skin low on his abdomen.

Hannibal turned, reaching up to drape his hair over his shoulder, exposing the long stretch of his back, unmarred save for the circular scar, roughly the size of Will's palm, slightly off centre from the spine. Will traced the edge and the shape inside, a crudely drawn *V* surrounded by smaller designs, having grown indistinct over time. "The Vergenst branded all their prisoners, but took particular pride in branding the Count of Lituae."

Will shouldn't have been surprised, with all that he knew. Hannibal turned again, brushing Will's hand aside. "And I took particular pleasure in tearing the lot of them to pieces, for all the good it did my people."

"I'm sorry," Will said, knowing even before he spoke how inadequate it was, but suddenly Hannibal's devotion to this place made sense. Why he would return here in what some might see as an fool's errand, to preserve the language and culture of his people and fight back however he could against their Russian occupiers.

Hannibal gave him a soft smile, as if he knew where Will's mind wandered. "Have I ruined the image you've drawn of me?" he asked. "Of the unfeeling, inhuman demon, incapable of emotion."

"Would such a creature have saved Abigail or myself?" Will wondered aloud. "Would he have taken vengeance on the mother who killed her children? Would he have tried to restore them to life?"

They were so close, and Hannibal's eyes seemed to pull him in. Will couldn't resist the urge to kiss him again. Now that he'd experienced the sensation, he couldn't imagine having gone without for so long. The sweep of Hannibal's tongue against his burned through him, and Will got lost in it. "I suppose," he said, between soft presses of their lips, "I will know for myself, soon enough."

Hannibal caught Will's wandering hands in his own and kissed him again, so gently Will trembled. "Your ability will no doubt be changed by the transformation you undergo, but make no mistake, Will: I was never a man, in the way you define it. I was never bound by emotion or morality. The strength of my feelings for you has taken me by surprise."

Will was shaken by the words, by the idea that even as a man, Hannibal's mind had been so cold and calm. But the fact remained that Hannibal was capable of a wide range of human

emotion, whether he openly acknowledged and embraced the fact, or not. “Is that a declaration of love?” he asked.

“Would it better help you to reconcile the choice you’ve made, to hear it?” Hannibal asked, brow arched.

Will bent his head, following the path made by their hands, lips brushing down from Hannibal’s collarbone to his side and over his belly. “I don’t need to hear it to know it’s true,” he said. His eyes darted to the prominent bulge in Hannibal’s shorts, so close to his own mouth. It was a temptation Will couldn’t resist. He leaned in, exhaling shakily over the shape of Hannibal’s cock through the material. It wasn’t enough; Will’s mouth watered for the taste of Hannibal’s skin.

Hannibal groaned softly, hands coming to rest on Will’s shoulders. “I know what I want,” Will whispered, untying the lacing of Hannibal’s shorts, “even if I tried to deny it before.”

Once unfastened, the shorts fell loose to the floor, leaving Hannibal bare under Will’s gaze. He was larger than Will had expected--he’d seen enough men naked in passing to know that he was larger than average, and Hannibal was larger still, thicker and longer. He was fully erect, cock jutting out proudly, foreskin drawn back enough to expose the head. It was slick with cloudy liquid leaking steadily from the slit and Will drew his thumb through it and sucked it in his mouth, tasting.

Will didn’t have time to fully appreciate the taste before Hannibal had wrapped his hands tight around his upper arms and hauled him upright, and threw him back against the the bed, following closely. He pinned Will there with fierce, hungry kisses, spilling heat along the line of Will’s scalp and down his back. He shivered and clung to Hannibal’s shoulders as his clothing was all but torn from his body.

Already Will’s body was growing aroused again, so soon after release. He’d never experienced anything like it. Rather than being satiated, Will only wanted more. He revelled in each new exposed bit of skin, pressed close to Hannibal’s. Shirt and trousers tossed aside, Hannibal’s hands shoved down the back of his shorts, grabbing Will’s buttocks and squeezing. Will arched upward and whimpered. There were so many places that he'd never thought to be erotic, until Hannibal touched him there. Now, kissing along Will’s jaw and nibbling at his ear, sending ripples of pleasure down his neck, and Hannibal’s probing fingers finding his hole and brushing over the opening. It made Will seize up, trying to pull away, too much for him to bear all at once.

Hannibal let Will go, watching with heavy eyes, on all fours like some wild animal, as Will shrank back against the headboard. He grabbed the waistband of Will’s shorts and pulled them down roughly. Will kicked his legs, helping free himself of them entirely. His heart thundered in his chest, waiting for whatever would come next. Slowly, Hannibal laid a hand on his ankle, smoothing up the curve of his calf, thumb pressing into the sensitive flesh of his thigh, and back down again. His hand closed tight and he gave a tug, pulling Will out flat on the bed. Hannibal sank down on his stomach, palms flattening under Will’s knees, spreading his legs up and open, and he ducked his head, lips just grazing the skin of his upper thigh, right above the cut there.

There was a soft sound reminiscent of a blade being drawn, and then Will felt the brief press of fangs, a warning, before Hannibal bit down hard. Will let out a shriek at the sensation. It was neither entirely painful, nor entirely pleasurable, but incredibly intense. He threaded his fingers in Hannibal's hair and pulled the long strands hard, holding on as Hannibal began to suck great mouthfuls of blood, moaning against Will's skin.

It was as if Hannibal had tapped into something essential inside him and Will could feel it being drawn from his body, tingling through his fingers and toes and up his limbs, leaving him through Hannibal's mouth. His cock pulsed in time with the slow movement of Hannibal's mouth on him--the slide of his tongue against the wound, the blunt press of his teeth coaxing the blood, the roll of his lips.

"Please," he murmured, light-headed. He licked his lips, but it did nothing to alleviate the dryness in his mouth. "Oh, Hannibal, I need--"

Hannibal drew back, plucking a kiss against the wound, and smiled at Will, fangs bared, teeth red with his blood. He rolled his hips against Will's, dragging the length of his cock along Will's. Will cried out, nails biting into Hannibal's skin. "Please," he said again, an edge of desperation in his voice.

"I'll give you what you need," Hannibal said, even as he wrapped his hand around Will's length and squeezed. He closed the space between them, licking into Will's mouth and down his neck. The spot where he sucked was tender from his attention, no doubt bruised. Still he did not sink his fangs in there. Hannibal made an inhuman sound that rumbled in his chest. "Your flavour is intoxicating."

Will reached out blindly, head craned back to let Hannibal close, and found him by touch. Fingers brushing down the hard line of Hannibal's abdomen and through the patch of coarse hair leading down to his goal. He took ahold of Hannibal's cock and tried to move in time with Hannibal's hand on him, those rough, sure strokes that made Will's muscles draw tight and quiver with the effort to hold still.

As impactful as his dreams had been, as much as he'd longed for this with Hannibal, Will was unprepared for how powerfully arousing it was to hold Hannibal's delicate sex in his hand. To be the source of the noises Hannibal made, the full-body moans that rumbled between them; the damp puff of breath against his throat--that Hannibal was so discombobulated by him that his body had fallen back on unnecessary, autonomic reflex, centuries gone.

Hannibal ran a hand down Will's ribcage, coming the rest at the hollow below, and pressed down gently. "Slowly," he murmured. "We have all the time in the world, My Love."

Will smiled, bringing his hands up to cup Hannibal's cheeks, and guiding them up face to face. "We have all the time in the world, and I want you now. We can go slowly later."

Hannibal shared his grin, turning his head to place a kiss on the palm of one hand, then the other. "Very well." He sat up and stretched across Will's body for the nightstand. From the drawer he pulled a jar which he opened, and dipped his fingers inside, coating them in the viscous liquid. "Lie on your stomach."

Will stared at him for a moment, heart caught in his throat, trepidation building inside. As much as he longed for Hannibal's touch, he could not help his fear of handing over control to another entirely. It was foolish--he'd was trusting Hannibal with his life, after all, he would trust Hannibal with his body, as well. He took a steadying breath, and for the first time it occurred to him that he had a limited quantity of those left. With that thought turning uneasily in his mind, Will did as he was told, and rolled onto his stomach.

"In time," Hannibal said, "you will come to appreciate how pain can serve to heighten your pleasure." His clean hand settling against the base of Will's spine, stroking back and forth there.

Will was caught off guard when the touch turned from gentle to rough, the sting going straight to Will's cock when Hannibal's nails dragged along sensitive skin. His breath stuttered in his chest and he ground down against the mattress. He could almost hear Hannibal's smile when spoke again. He'd leaned in close, lips brushing the swell of Will's ass. "For now, I will do my best to be gentle with you."

Careful fingers parted his cheeks and then pressed, slippery-slick, against the opening of Will's body. His muscles seized up anticipation, tight against the pressure. Hannibal brushed a delicate kiss to his skin at the small of his back. His tongue traced the lines his nails had left behind, over the curve of Will's buttocks, and down, along the crease where it met his thigh.

The patient coaxing was expected from Hannibal, if not from the vampire. How long would it take for Will to reconcile one with the other, when he was expecting the gentle touch to give way to sting of fangs pricking his flesh at any moment?

But it did not come, only the steady press of Hannibal's fingers, two of them, moving back and and forth in a slow circle against his hole. Will was taken with the underlying sense of immorality of this act, and that made it difficult to focus on anything else at all. He tried to ignore it and focus on breathing as Hannibal began to push inward. The slick substance lubricated the way, a little further with each incremental shift in Will's muscles.

At first it felt like nothing more than pressure, strange but not unwelcome. Then Will exhaled and Hannibal's fingers slipped in deep, all the way down to the join. There was something inside that Hannibal's fingertips had brushed, sending skittering sparks of pleasure along his nerves. Will shoved a hand to his mouth to try to stifle his cry. His hips thrust forward instinctively, desperate for pressure against his erection. Morality be damned.

Hannibal pulled his hand free and Will made a bereft noise, shoving backwards, trying to take his fingers again. "Wh--what are you--"

"Shh." Hannibal's teeth grazed his ass and Will shivered, clenching the sheets in both hands. "Patience," he soothed. "I promised you pleasure, Will."

Will nodded, shaky, and Hannibal touched him again, swirling the pads of his fingers around Will's opening. It tickled pleasantly, but he wanted more. He wanted that feeling again. That liquid bliss spreading throughout his entire body, unlike anything he'd ever known before.

The fingers breached him more easily this time, dipping in just past the second knuckle and crooking gently, and Will keened. “Yes, there, right there, oh fuck,” he managed, between panting breaths. “Please, *yes*.”

Hannibal chuckled. He laid himself out over Will’s back, nosing through the curls at the back of Will’s neck. His fingers slipped out to tease along the rim. “I had hoped to see you lose some of your precious control,” he said. “I just never dreamed it would happen so quickly.”

Will’s cheeks flamed with embarrassment, but it wasn’t enough to make him want to stop. He whined, grinding back on Hannibal’s fingers, huffed out another faint *please* and was rewarded with Hannibal pushing back inside, merciless in his attention to that spot. While his fingers worked Will open, his mouth bit and sucked down the line of Will’s spine. Though his fangs came out with that soft, distinct sound, he did not use them to pierce the skin again.

Once more, Will grew anxious awaiting it, attention split between the ecstatic pleasure of Hannibal’s fingers moving inside him and his fangs scraping lightly over skin, raising goosebumps in their wake. He shifted restlessly, startling at the new wave of pleasure that brought, and carefully rocked backwards, taking Hannibal’s fingers deeper.

Hannibal held still, letting Will impale himself on his hand, lips damp and warm from Will’s skin. Not quite kissing, dragging his mouth back and forth, inhaling and exhaling purposefully. Something deep and instinctual in Will responded with excitement. He wriggled beneath Hannibal until his fingers slipped free, and rolled onto his back. Hannibal’s gaze was heated, sweeping up and down his body.

Will reached out to touch him, fingers brushing the glistening tip of his prick, smearing the gathered liquid. He encircled Hannibal’s cock and gave it a slow pull as he eased further down the bed, thighs resting open against Hannibal’s. Tilting his hips invitingly, Will met Hannibal’s eyes. They were an unmistakable, bright crimson in that moment.

“Oh, my dear boy,” Hannibal purred, hand tracing down Will’s side. He closed the space between them, wrapping a tender hand around Will’s throat as they kissed. Just a little squeeze, and Will began to feel the strain to draw a breath. His cock throbbed in unexpected excitement, and he reached out, closing his hand over Hannibal’s, pressing down tighter.

Hannibal’s fingers spasmed, and he released Will, shaking off his hand and sitting back. He offered a hand in beckoning. “Come here.”

Will scrambled onto his knees, fingers tangling with Hannibal’s, arm coming up around his neck as Hannibal tugged him into a kiss. They twisted, Hannibal falling back heavily against the headboard. Will sprawled out over his lap, legs spread wide. In this position, each shift brings Will’s prick into contact with Hannibal’s, making them both cling tighter to one another as their mouths slid together again and again.

Will might never have done this outside his dreams, but just as it had then, his body knew how to move. He settled into a desperate rhythm, hands never still on Hannibal’s skin, sucking hungrily at Hannibal’s mouth. Hannibal allowed it, petting up and down his back and coming to rest on his hips.

Just when Will's moments turned erratic, nearing his climax, Hannibal's hands tightened. Will whined in frustration. "Hannibal, please…"

Hannibal reached between them, Will following his movements avidly, and took himself in hand. "Seat yourself on me."

"Yes," Will breathed, rising up on his knees. He allowed Hannibal to guide him into place.

"Slowly," Hannibal said, as Will began to lower himself again.

Will cried out at the first blunt press of him, head bowed to rest against Hannibal's shoulder. He shifted his hips back and forth, looking for just the right angle, and bearing down ceaselessly, until, quite suddenly, the head of Hannibal's prick speared him.

"Oh," he whispered in surprise. He rocked forward and the angle lessened the burn. Will sunk further down Hannibal's length until the discomfort got to be too much. Then he rose up on his knees, delighting in the drag of Hannibal's cock inside, until he slipped free. When he lowered himself again, there was less resistance. Each time was smoother and easier, and Will took Hannibal's cock deeper and deeper, until at last he could settle himself in Hannibal's lap with a slick glide that sent molten pleasure through Will's body.

Will rested there, thighs burning already from the exertion. He gave an experimental roll of his hips and bit down hard on Hannibal's shoulder at the bombardment of sensation. He moaned, loud and low, from deep within his chest. "Oh, oh, oh Hannibal, it's so good, oh fuck, it's so good."

There was a fine tremble in Hannibal's body, held still beneath him. His hands were bruisingly tight on Will's hips. "Is it good?" Will asked him, words muffled against Hannibal's skin.

Hannibal drew a slow, purposeful breath and let it out with a hiss. "You feel exquisite," he said. Will could hear the strain in his voice, and lifted his head to see the signs of tension in Hannibal's expression. Teeth pressed into his bottom lip, brow furrowed.

Will grinned and rose up and back down again in one quick, fluid roll of his hips, watching the fire flare in Hannibal's eyes. So Will did it again, grinding down hard, and leaned in to flick his tongue against one gleaming fang. Hannibal snapped at him, piercing the inside of Will's lip and blood spilled into his mouth.

Very suddenly, Hannibal grabbed him tight and held him close, sucking on the wound. His arms held Will firmly around the waist and he thrust upward. Will groaned, tipping his head back as Hannibal's mouth made it's way over the curve of his chin. Just beneath, his fangs skimmed across his jugular, with pressure enough for blood to well up to the surface.

Hannibal did it again, and again, a line of superficial slices down the column of Will's throat, thrusting up the meet the rolling of his hips. Will had found just the right angle, leaning into Hannibal's hold, clinging, so that every time Hannibal pushed into him, every time Will rocked back, Hannibal's cock found that place inside him. He shuddered with the force of

sensation, his own cock trapped between their bodies, the friction taking him close to the edge of reason.

“I’m so close,” he moaned, mouthing the sweat slick skin of Hannibal’s shoulder. It tasted musky and strangely metallic, and Will couldn’t stop kissing, sucking supple flesh between his teeth. He wanted to taste every part of Hannibal. He wanted to learn all the secrets of this strange, beautiful body beneath him. “I’m so close, Hannibal, it feels…”

It was incomparable. There were no words for how it felt; too different from any other experience. Not even the feeling of his own hand on himself, or Hannibal’s mouth could compare to this. The incredible pressure building, sparking bright whenever Hannibal touched that place inside of him, like he’d found some missing part of himself. “I need…”

Hannibal shushed him again and reached between them to wrap his hand around Will’s cock, pulling fast and rough in time with his thrusts. He nosed that sensitive spot below Will’s ear, and without warning, bit into the curve of his throat. Will tipped over the edge, all the breath driven from him so he couldn’t even cry out.

It seemed to go on forever. That pulling in his veins, like something was being taken, drawn from him as violently and pleasurably as his release. His heart throbbed in time with the pulse of his cock and he clamped down hard with his arms and legs twined around Hannibal’s body, even with those inner muscles that held Hannibal’s prick.

Even after his cock ceased to twitch, spent, the feeling went on. Waves of heat rippling through him, chased by cold, shivery spots along his arms and legs, like the feel of snow falling on his bare skin. His stomach turned and he held on as Hannibal rolled Will beneath him.

“Oh god,” Will moaned, when Hannibal began to drive into him, hard and fast. The suction was so great now it was far more painful than before. He heard a distant whining noise and tried to stop, but he couldn’t. Just when he thought he couldn’t bear it any longer, Hannibal pulled back. His expression was fierce and alien, teeth bared, eyes glowing, and he crashed their mouths together.

Will’s arms were so heavy, clinging to Hannibal by will alone, and his legs fell to the bed, splayed open wide. Hannibal’s pace faltered and he buried himself deep, groaning into Will’s mouth. He did his best to kiss back, but he was weak. Between the loss of blood and his shortness of breath, he was barely clinging to consciousness. It was like floating in a very pleasant, temperate stream. There was no solid ground beneath him, just a cool, gentle ebb and sway.

Hannibal withdrew from him, but Will barely felt it. The only thing he could focus on was the slow, unsteady beat of his heart, echoing in his head, and the tacky-damp feeling of his own blood dripping down his neck. Hannibal was so gentle, moving him up the bed to rest his head upon a pillow, and Will smiled, or at least meant to, but he couldn’t be sure.

There was his vampire, once again subverting all expectations, handling him with such care and tenderness. Will tried to reach out to touch his bloodstained mouth, but Hannibal caught Will’s hand with both of his and kissed the back, before laying it against Will’s chest. He took

Will by the chin and tipped his head back, and then Will was aware too of the drag of his tongue, lapping up the blood.

Under his delicate ministrations, the wound no longer ached and the bleeding slowed. Will wanted to speak. He had so many things he longed to know still. But for now he was lost in this blissful cloud of bone deep satisfaction. He would allow Hannibal to care for him, rolling Will onto his side and lying down behind him. Pulling him close, draping the covers over them.

Will sighed, and slipped beneath placid surface, swallowed up by the cool of the water. It was so peaceful there. Free of the weight of other minds intruding upon his own. There was only himself, and Hannibal, lurking dark at the edges of his mind.

“The pleasure you feel now will be magnified ten-fold, once I’ve changed you,” Hannibal murmured, cheek pressed to Will’s, warm, as he spoke. Heated by Will’s own blood in Hannibal’s veins.

“Have you done it?” Will asked, words slurred.

Hannibal shook his head. He sounded distant and thoughtful when he spoke. “You will know when it happens,” he said. “You will have to drink from me, as well.”

“Haven’t I done that already?” Will said, wry. “Unwittingly?”

“There is a bit more to it than that. I will have to drain you to the point of death.” Hannibal held him closer. “It can be quite unpleasant, if done in haste.”

“But you won’t allow that,” Will said, with certainty. “A gentle monster.”

“For the deserving, perhaps,” Hannibal said, after a pause. “For you, indubitably.”

“My gentle monster,” Will said, laughing in pure, exhausted delight. He lifted his hand with great effort, laying it over Hannibal’s, where it rested against his chest. Growing accustomed to the cadence of his heart, committing it to memory so he could recall it with clarity once it beat no more.

Will could sense Hannibal's regret--nothing lasting, and certainly nothing strong enough to keep him from making Will into a vampire as well, but it had a bittersweet tang to it. Will wanted to take his mind from it. “What sort of monster will I be?” he wondered.

“I can’t wait to find out,” Hannibal murmured.

Chapter End Notes

oh my god, I lied about the length, again. But I don't want to rush this. Hannibal would kill me if I didn't let him have everything just right when he turned Will,

so...ANOTHER CHAPTER!!

Make Sure the Path to Take

Chapter Notes

> Okay, I've stopped trying to pretend this isn't spiralling out of my control. I actually do have this pretty much finished, save some editing and a final scene BUT...it felt rushed, and there was no actual vampire!Will--it ends right after Hannibal turns him. I wanted to be able to take some time exploring things a bit more in depth, which is why I've decided to extend this a couple more chapters. Right now I'm say two more--that might change to one or three, depending on how much I expand some of the scenes.

Will woke in the night to an empty bed. He lay there for a moment, wrapped in soft sheets, warm from the fire. There was no lingering pain from his injuries at the hand of Tier's beast. He wondered if he were to remove the bandage, would there remain any wound at all, or would the blood Hannibal had been giving him have healed it entirely?

Though Will wanted nothing more than to drift back to sleep, weak and drowsy from pleasure and blood loss, he was curious as to where Hannibal had gone. The room spun around him for a dizzying moment when he stood. Will clung to the bedpost until it passed. A silken kimono hung over the footboard, as if Hannibal had left it laid out for him. It felt utterly delicious against his over-sensitised skin.

The house was dark and quiet. Will made his way downstairs and only there could he hear the faint sound of movement from the cellar. Light flickered from the open doorway in the kitchen, and Will followed it down the narrow, winding steps. The temperature dropped precipitously when he finally set foot on the stone floor.

"Hannibal?"

Wall sconces flickered with candlelight, casting uncertain shadows over the room. He could make out row upon row of dusty wine bottles, shelves of cheeses and dried meats, perfect unblemished fruits and hard-skinned vegetables. In the corner herb hung over a tabletop covered in mortar and pestle, jars and mixing bowls and sieves.

Moss grew up from the cracks in the flooring, soft and cool against Will's bare feet as he walked through the room. A pile of ash sat on a scale next to a doughy mixture and on the back of his tongue, Will could taste the bread Hannibal had served him. Hannibal's hand fell on his shoulder, and Will had to fight the urge to jump, a fine shudder going through him. "I didn't hear you."

Hannibal nosed at his neck, and Will tucked his chin to his chest, baring the long line of it for Hannibal's exploration. The next shiver had nothing to do with the cold or fear. Hannibal's kisses were teasingly light until he reached the mark he'd left on Will's throat. It was not

painful, but tender, and when Hannibal dragged his tongue over the wound, Will's cock stirred with interest.

"I was preparing a place for you to rest," Hannibal murmured, distracted.

"Am--ah--" Will's knees buckled when Hannibal bit down gently on the spot. Hannibal's arm looped around his waist, holding him upright, and Will clung to him. "Am I not to share your room with you?"

Hannibal rocked against him, the hard line of his arousal tucked against the curve of Will's ass. "Once you've undergone your transformation, it will take some time for you to build a tolerance to the sunlight. At first, even the dimmest rays will cause you discomfort."

"So you're going to keep me in your cellar?" Will meant the words to come out scornfully, but he was too breathless from Hannibal's ministrations. He turned in Hannibal's arms lifting a hand to his jaw to guide their mouths together.

"Allow me to show you," Hannibal said, between slow kisses. "I think you'll find the accommodations to your standards." His hands were warm through the silk on Will's hips and Will sat back against the edge of the table, opening his legs for Hannibal to settle between. He tugged at the hem of Hannibal's shirt in search of bare skin.

"Will you be with me?" Will asked.

A trembling anxiety was rising up in his gut, threatening to turn into full-blown panic. Jack's voice inside his head demanding what he was doing, asking if Will knew what it was he was about to do. In Hannibal's room, caught up in the pleasures of the flesh, it was difficult to focus on anything else. Here, in the damp cool of the cellar, reality crept slowly up on him.

"Are you harbouring doubts, my love?" Hannibal drew away from him, until the only place they were touching was their interlocked fingers.

"I dreamt of you, before," Will said. "Was that really you visiting me in the night?"

"In a manner of speaking." Hannibal tugged on their joined hands and Will obligingly stood. He stepped closer, palm to Will's cheek, toying with his loose curls. "From the moment you arrived in town, I could sense your presence. The strength of your mind."

"Strength?" Will echoed wryly, lowering his gaze.

"That you don't recognise it only makes you all the more precious to me," Hannibal murmured, lips pressing a kiss to his forehead. "When you showed up on my doorstep, the temptation to take you was almost too great to bear, and every word you spoke only drew me further under your spell. I had to know for certain you were worthy."

"Or you would have killed me." Will remembered him saying it now, but even in his apprehension, he knew that to be untrue.

"Many men have sought to destroy me throughout the centuries," Hannibal said. "I have not survived them all by allowing myself to become distracted by any pretty face."

Will laughed, shaky but delighted because here they were, despite Hannibal's protests. He squeezed Hannibal's fingers. "Show me?"

Through the heavy wooden door was a smaller, much cosier space. Carpets layered the ground, warm and soft, and there was a bed as fine as the ones upstairs, though hung in thick velvet curtains and fur blanket. A dormant fireplace sat along the exterior wall, and there was a giant wooden tub in the corner.

"You won't be as sensitive to temperature, or at least you won't perceive it in the same way," Hannibal said. "It is difficult for me to explain; it's been far too long since I've experienced it. However, a warm environment will give you more energy and is far more pleasant than extreme heat or cold."

Some of the tightness in Will's chest loosened at the familiarity and comfort of it. "No coffin?" he asked. He could vividly recall the image of it from his dream and the vampire inviting him to lay inside.

"If you would prefer it, I could obtain one for you." Hannibal's voice was full of indulgent humour. He pulled Will with him to the bed. "Some of my kind prefer to live on the fringes of society--interacting only with other vampires, relocating frequently as to not draw attention, operating only at night and using coffins for sleep and travel. There is a great deal of ritual and superstition."

Will was only beginning to understand the full complexity of Hannibal's thoughts and motivations, but it made sense to him that Hannibal did not hold with such things. Hannibal still felt a deep connection to the culture and history of which he'd been a part in life.

"In my dreams," Will began, going where Hannibal led, climbing into his lap on the bed, thighs spread wide over his lap.

"The images you conjured were entirely from your own mind," Hannibal hummed. He pressed a kiss under Will's chin. "You gave me form and in doing so, allowed me to communicate with you. Telling, don't you think?"

From the very first dream, the plain and unadorned coffin had been a disappointment. Not out of some desire to be interred within, but for what it represented. Will was searching for something grand and ancient and luxurious. He had already, without acknowledging it, felt some kinship towards the killer and had longed for a connection. Someone finally capable of understanding him.

No matter what he'd told himself again and again, no matter the protests he'd made to Hannibal, this was always where he was heading. This was what had brought him to this place. This was what he longed for. Will sank his fingers in Hannibal's hair, and kissed him, mouth slanting hungrily over Hannibal's.

Lingering disquiet gave way to calm certainty. His misgivings melted into enthusiastic desire at his realisation. "Am I ready now, Hannibal?" Will rocked in Hannibal's lap, grinding down against the hardness he felt. He moaned at the sparks of arousal coursing through him.

“Your impatience is flattering.” Will gasped as Hannibal’s fangs broke the skin and his tongue lapped up the blood. “And enticing. However, there are considerations to be addressed, besides your physical comfort. I assume that if you were to simply disappear, your friend Jack Crawford would come looking for you?”

That was an effectively sobering thought. Will sat up straighter, ice cold running through him. If Jack were to come after him, the villagers would point him towards Hannibal. While he might be fooled by Hannibal’s charm under different circumstances, if he were investigating Will’s last known whereabouts there would be no question in his mind. He would not hesitate to attempt to kill Hannibal. Will could guess that would not end well for Jack, and he would prefer to spare his old friend’s life, if at all possible.

Hannibal rolled them onto the bed, lifting Will to rest with his head on the pillows and curled into his side. His head came to rest on Will’s chest where his heart beat steadily. “I can also assume, from your reaction just now, that you would like to prevent that from occurring.”

“Jack doesn’t need to be drawn into this,” Will said.

Hannibal made a small, thoughtful noise. “That may be inevitable. His is a name with which I was familiar even before you arrived. He is well-known among my kind for those he has hunted; they fear him.”

Jack would never rest Will knew all too well. Once Bella was gone, and if Will disappeared, he would never stop his hunt until all the vampires were dead, or he was. That didn’t mean Hannibal had to be the one to deal the fatal blow. “What shall we do?”

Hannibal turned his face into Will’s chest, nosing at the silken fabric. His hand trailed down the seam of the robe until he found the sash and gave the knot a tug. The robe fell open, Will’s skin prickling from the cold air. “We could simply relocate before your transformation, but that feels a bit premature.”

“You will be confined to the indoors during daylight hours for some time; the villagers never need know of your continued presence here.” His hand had found its way inside the robe, fingers cooling even as he stroked along the line of Will’s ribs, downwards, his intent unmistakeable. “That is, if you aren’t opposed to remaining in the house, with only myself and Abigail for company.”

Will’s breath caught as Hannibal traced the curve of his navel. He stroked lower, counter to the coarse hair leading towards his goal. “I...ah…” Will swallowed hard and tilted his hips in entreaty. “I suppose there are plenty of ways to occupy my time.”

Hannibal nudged the robe from his shoulder and kissed the curve of it. Delicate little kisses Will barely felt beyond the tickle of the fine hairs there. “Of course the library would be at your disposal,” he said, the casual tone of voice teasing, even as he wrapped a hand around Will’s prick and Will gasped, arching off the bed. “I could teach you to cook. Perhaps we could finally persuade you to sing for us.”

“Hannibal,” Will moaned. He grabbed a fistful of silver blonde hair and gave a sharp tug.

“My love?” Hannibal asked. He thumbed the exposed head of Will’s cock, eliciting a high-pitched whine.

Will’s hips fell back against the bed, and panting he caught Hannibal’s mouth with his own, biting hard on his bottom lip. “Did you stock this room with that oil from your room?”

Hannibal’s eyes sparkled with pure mischievous glee. “I did,” he said.

“Then I believe we--oh--we shall have no trouble at all pah--passing the time,” Will said. He parted his legs invitingly. “I’ve never been very fond of the company of others anyway, with few notable exceptions.”

With his free hand, Hannibal brushed against his hole. Will bit his lip hard, making the cuts there split and dipped his head to smear the blood over Hannibal’s lips. The reaction was predictable, but nonetheless thrilling. Hannibal growled and rolled on top of him, cock pressing insistent between his thighs. His hands moved to cup Will’s bottom as he sucked the blood from his mouth.

Unlike his other, older wounds, there remained some slight discomfort from Hannibal’s impassioned love-making. But that did not deter Will in the least. He enjoyed the reminder of Hannibal’s desire for him, twinging every time he moved. The muscles of his opening clenched in happy anticipation of experiencing it again.

Hannibal sat up on his knees and looked down at Will, expression one of a starving man at a feast. “I suppose it showed a true lack of foresight on my part, assuming we’d leave the bed for any substantial length of time.”

Will licked his lips, in what he hoped was an enticing manner. If the flare of heat in Hannibal’s gaze was any indication, he’d say he’d succeeded. “The oil, Hannibal,” he said, stretching an arm out towards the nightstand.

Slowly, Hannibal shook his head. “I promised you pleasure you couldn’t even imagine.”

“You have given me it,” Will said. He reached out to enclose Hannibal’s erection in his hand.

“I haven’t even begun,” Hannibal said, voice rumbling low in his chest. “And I want to taste you.”

Will tipped his chin towards the ceiling, and Hannibal chuckled. “Oh,” he said, lips to Will’s pulse. “No, my love.” He inhaled deeply, purposefully. “Your scent is nearly as addictive as the flavour of your blood and skin and seed,” he murmured, “but there is so much of you still to explore.”

Before Will had the time to consider his words, Hannibal had flipped him onto his stomach. His hands parted Will’s cheeks, and then, without warning, his mouth was pressed there, against the opening of his body. If he’d had a chance to consider it, no doubt he’d have been appalled, but there was no opportunity. Hannibal’s tongue licked at the muscles of the rim and Will cried out at the blinding pleasure of it.

Hannibal was relentless. He gave Will no time to adjust to the sensation or the intensity of it. His tongue plunged inside, effortlessly finding that place within that made Will's whole body quiver, made his voice rise in a trembling keen torn from his throat.

It was slippery and sinuous, the roll and press of Hannibal's tongue inside him, the suction of his lips around his entrance, the gentle, perilous scrape of his teeth along too sensitive nerve endings. Will clenched at the sheets and buried his face in the pillow, begging shamelessly for more, for Hannibal never to stop.

When he was slick with saliva and open from Hannibal's attention, it was then that one of Hannibal's long, thick fingers pierced him, alongside the sweep of his tongue. He probed at that spot, varying his pressure and the length of his stroke--firm jabs, soft swipes, barely tracing the edge of it.

Where before the euphoria was intense but unfocussed, now Will felt it mounting rapidly, pressure building in his thighs and tightening his testicles. He rose up on his hands and knees, rocking back desperately on Hannibal's hand and tongue. "Oh, please," he whined, tears leaking from the corners of his eyes.

Hannibal moaned, the feel of it reverberating through him. Will bucked his hips, chasing the sensation. His muscles tensed "Hannibal, please, it's too much, I need--"

"Shh." Hannibal soothed a hand down the outside of Will's thigh. A second finger pushed in alongside the first as he withdrew his tongue to kiss the swell of his ass. "Stop fighting against it," he coaxed, as his fingers coaxed rapturous bliss from Will's body. "Surrender to it."

Will hid his burning cheeks in the cradle of his arms, relaxed his muscles, and let the sensations wash over him. "Yes," Hannibal said, "like that." He rewarded Will's obedience by flattening his fingertips atop the spot and massaging.

It was as if Hannibal were an archer, drawing the line of Will's pleasure tight, to the snapping point. He bowed his head again to lick around Will's entrance as his fingers beckoned inside, and Will began to shake with the force of his orgasm as it finally crested and swept through him. His cock leapt against his stomach, his release erupting with great force across his chest.

Will chased it as long as he could, lights flashing bright behind his closed eyes. At last he slumped against the bed, exhausted. His chest heaved with laboured breaths, muscles jerking with aftershocks as Hannibal moved to blanket Will with his own body. Hannibal was hard, tucked in the space between his cheeks. He thrust a handful of times before spilling his seed across Will's back.

"Next time," Hannibal murmured, peppering kisses over the back of Will's shoulders, "I'll teach you how to find my prostate with you fingers." He nipped at Will's earlobe and fingers squeezed his hip. "And your cock."

The words had a physical effect on Will; though spent, it made his cock twitch with interest. He licked his lips and turned his head to the side, blinked open his eyes to glance back at Hannibal. "I think I would like that very much."

Hannibal laughed, and he sounded utterly human, utterly accessible and Will smiled in response, body lax beneath him. Whether it was the amount of time that had passed, or the manner in which he'd exerted himself, Hannibal's skin was cool to the touch again. No longer overtaken by pleasurable sensation, Will began to shiver in the chill of the air.

"You need your rest," Hannibal said, rising from the bed to retrieve Will's robe, tying his own closed as he returned. "Tomorrow you will need to begin to lay the groundwork for your disappearance."

"Oh?" Will asked. He raised his head, bleary, and allowed Hannibal to manipulate his limbs into the robe.

"We can discuss it after you've slept a while longer," Hannibal said. He bent to pick Will up in his arms, and Will huffed an amused sigh.

"I *can* walk for myself," he said.

Hannibal set him on his feet and Will caught him by the collar of his robe and tugged him in for a kiss. It quickly turned passionate, Hannibal backing him against the wall. "I didn't mean to suggest that I *minded*," Will whispered against his mouth.

No sooner were the words from his mouth than Hannibal had swept him into his arms again. Will's laughter, delighted and exhausted, trailed them up the stairs.

*

There was a handful of villagers in the dining area of the inn when Will stepped inside, and they all fell silent at his arrival. Brian scowled at him and stomped into the next room. A moment later, Beverly came out.

Will fidgeted with his shirt collar. He knew it was high enough to cover the bruises Hannibal had left, and his scarf concealed the bite mark, but he still felt as though everyone who saw him would know at once. Beverly gave him a shrewd look and he dropped his hands to his side at her approach.

"You look well. Surprisingly well," she said, arms crossed over her chest.

"Doctor Lecter has kindly given me some laudanum to see me through my journey," he said. He tried for a smile and had a feeling it failed miserably.

"Your journey?" Beverly demanded, now cross and concerned. "Where are you going in your condition?"

"As you said, the townspeople aren't pleased with my presence. I should return home."

Beverly stared him down in disbelief. "That will take weeks. Surely it would be best to recover here, under Doctor Lecter's care."

Will shrugged stiffly. "There's only so much he can do for me with the facilities he has access to here. There are plenty of hospitals in Warsaw--they can care for me there, if necessary, or

at the very least ensure the wound is stabilized before I begin the journey to America."

Beverly bit her lip and glanced over her shoulder to where her husband was watching them through narrowed eyes. "I don't know what happened that night, but I do know that you were certain that Tier and the vampire were two different creatures, and now you're simply leaving?"

"I'm not certain of anything, any longer. I don't know if I can trust what I've seen and experienced since arriving here," Will told her, and there was more than a little honesty to what he said. "It's possible I allowed my judgement to be compromised by what I expected to find. I'm sorry for the trouble I've caused you and your husband."

"Professor!" Beverly caught his uninjured arm as he turned to leave. "I don't believe you," she told him, eyes scanning his face. There was a queer half-smile on her lips as if she had found a puzzle and was determined to solve it.

"You know the people of this town better than I do, Beverly," Will said. "Your neighbours and friends and patrons. Are there any among them capable of killing in such a fashion?"

"As odd as Randall Tier was, I never would have guessed he was responsible for what happened to Quaid," Beverly said. "The research you had, showing attacks going back to the 1790s...it would have been impossible for him to have carried those out. He was, in the end, only a man."

Beverly put herself in a precarious situation, the only one of the villagers to entertain the possibility of the vampire, and the only one unwilling to allow Will's investigation to rest. Will liked her open, casual friendliness and the fierce protectiveness he saw when he looked at her--for her husband and her family's inn, and the people she'd begun to think of as family. If she persisted in his absence, he prayed her suspicion never fell on Hannibal, for her sake.

"I have little doubt Jack will want to review the data. Perhaps he'll return to the area at some point," Will said, taking her hand in his. He looked into her eyes and thought of what Hannibal had said, about his strength of mind. In his gaze he tried to convey warm reassurance and ineffable calm. "Wit is far preferable to bravery, Beverly. Stay safe."

She frowned at his words, but did not stop him, letting his hand slip free of her hold as he turned to go. Will could only hope she would heed his warning.

After sleeping soundly five hours more, and having breakfasted on Hannibal's ashy bread, cepelinai stuffed with cheese curd and ground meat, thick slices of crispy bacon, and boiled eggs, Will felt refreshed and prepared for his journey. Hannibal had packed him cured meat, roasted nuts, and more of the bread to eat alone the way, admonishing him to eat it all, as his body needed the protein and iron.

The path to Vosyliukai was well travelled during the daylight hours by traders and messengers, and others conducting their business. Will carried on a halting conversation with an elderly Polish gentleman returning home after visiting with his grandchildren for much of the journey. Though he'd have preferred to travel in silence and at a much greater pace, it was important his fellow travellers remember him.

They reached Vosyliukai around mid-afternoon, and Will caught the four o'clock coach to Kaunas. It was near-full, 8 passengers crowded together. His senses were still heightened from having ingested Hannibal's blood, in whatever form it had been given to him. The stench of sweat and cologne and flowery ladies' perfume was almost too much to bear on the nearly ten hour ride with its various stops along the way.

By midnight it was down to Will and two others. The coach driver saw them to a cabin on the edge of town where they could spend the night. Will tossed and turned on the straw-stuffed mattress, too hot and cold by turns, and missing the press of Hannibal's skin to his own.

Will had spent much of the day considering the possibility that with so much distance between them, he might come to his senses, so to speak. Jack had posited the idea of a vampire's thrall, one held under the sway of a vampire's mind, compelled to carry out his every order. He recalled Hannibal staring into his eyes for an eternity, before bidding Will goodnight at the inn, and the dreams that followed.

But he woke in the morning clear-headed, having dreamt of nothing at all, and there was no uncertainty in him. The travel was emotionally exhausting and had only served to remind him of his daily life at home, surrounded by the very dregs of humanity, immersed in their minds. Even his students, and those people he'd considered friends only tolerated his quirks and he had tolerated their condescension.

Day after day he waded through a sea of mundane cruelty, petty spite and jealousy, anger, conceit, and greed, and all the darkest characteristics of the human race. Night after night he hid away, desperately lonely, ever seeking some peace of mind.

Never had Will anticipated that he would find someone like Hannibal. Someone who could not only ease the loneliness of Will's heart or grant him peace of mind, but who sought to bring all that dark to beauty and light. Everything about him was rarified and lovely.

Now he only longed to return to Hannibal's home, safe from the intrusion of others. To Hannibal's bed, where he might further explore what pleasures that were to be found between their two bodies. To Hannibal's embrace and the promise that entailed of care and comfort and blessed silence.

After another hearty breakfast, he sent a telegraph to Jack, informing him of what had transpired, and his intention to return home. Then he purchased a ticket and boarded the train that would, as far as anyone else was concerned, convey him to Warsaw. As it left town and began to pick up speed at the edge of the forest, he left his bags behind, and disembarked from the empty car at the rear.

It was all according to the plan Hannibal had laid, and still Will was uncertain what he would find, until he walked into the woods. The trees were dense, the undergrowth treacherous, and there was no path to speak of, but after picking his way through for several minutes, there was a rustling, the air around him shifted.

Hannibal stood before him and spread his arms open. "Are you ready to return home now?"

“Home,” Will repeated, smiling around the shape of the word. He stepped close, winding his arms around Hannibal’s neck. “Take me home, Hannibal.”

To Drink Deeply From That Vein

Chapter Notes

There's some rough sex and implication of past non-con (not in the Hannigram).

Hannibal moved so quickly Will couldn't quite process what he was seeing or feeling. The world around them passed by in a blur of ice crystals suspended from the bare trees, snow glistening in the sunlight. Wind stung like pinpricks against his exposed skin and he squeezed his eyes tight, pressed his face to Hannibal's chest, and held on tight. What had taken a day on foot and by coach took a mere fraction of that time in Hannibal's arms.

At the manor, Will bathed away the grime and stench of travel. When he finished, Hannibal prepared them a grand meal for lunch. Abigail dined with them, a hesitant smile curling her lips as she sipped at her bowl of soup.

"I'm glad you're staying with us," she said, eyes downcast.

"I had worried you were frightened of me," Will said cautiously.

Abigail met his gaze briefly. "No," she said. "Not frightened *of* you. If anything, I'm envious."

"Oh?" Will glanced from her to Hannibal, who was watching her with a fatherly, indulgent humour. "Why is that?"

"Hannibal says I'm too young for his gift. I have to wait."

"I have seen what becomes of those who are taken too young," Hannibal said. His own bowl of soup was largely untouched. "The promise of eternal youth is enticing. Sometimes it takes decades or centuries before they begin to regret the choice they've made. Trapped in a body that does not reflect the maturity of their minds. She will see the world and experience all it has to offer, and if she decides to return to me, after, I will do as she asks."

Abigail scoffed, but there was no true scorn in it. "*When* I do," she said, and gave Will a blinding smile, "we can all be a family." Her tremulous hope radiated between them. A longing for something she'd only ever known as a concept.

Will reached across the table and placed his hand over hers. "I'd like that very much."

After lunch, Abigail gathered their dishes and took them to the kitchen. With cool nonchalance, Hannibal lifted Will's hand from the tabletop to his mouth and pricked the pad of his finger against his fang. He suckled gently and the simple sensation sent arousal

coursing through Will's veins, pulled from him as surely as his blood, by Hannibal's wicked mouth.

"Will you regret having turned me, when you can no longer take nourishment from my blood?" Will whispered.

Eyes closed, cheeks hollowed, lips plush and swollen against Will's skin, Hannibal looked obscene. Will's trousers felt too tight, drawn over his rapidly hardening prick. Will took a hasty gulp from his water glass.

Hannibal took his time responding, licking over Will's fingertip and down to the thin, sensitive skin between his fingers. "It is true, your blood won't be enough to sustain me, but that does not mean I won't be able to take pleasure from consuming it." He scraped his blunt bottom teeth over the wound. "The flavour will undergo some change, but there is a quality that is uniquely your own which will remain."

"That being said…" Hannibal rose and Will with him. "I would not be opposed to keeping you here as you currently are, for some time. Though it was my impression that you were quite eager to get on with it."

Will shook his head. He stepped closer, until they were chest to chest. Daylight streamed through the windows. In the next room he could hear Abigail moving around; dishes clattering and running water. This was risqué, not to mention indecent. What would she say if she were to see them like this?

Yet it did not stop Will from resting his hands on Hannibal's hips and rubbing the proof of his eagerness against Hannibal's thigh. "You were not mistaken," he murmured, eyes trained on Hannibal's mouth, half-parted and stained from his blood. "I fought it so long, Hannibal. What I desired. What I *needed*. I don't want to wait any longer."

There was a desperate, whining quality to his voice that he did not like, but Hannibal stopped him from speaking any further, closing that last miniscule distance between them. He thrust his tongue into Will's mouth, all passion and no finesse, as needy as Will felt. They stumbled into the table, crystal and silver rattling.

A candle holder skittered to the floor with a crash and Hannibal pulled away from him, growling. "You think I have ensnared you, but I fear it is the other way around," he said.

Will thought he had never smiled as frequently and honestly in his entire life than he had since meeting Hannibal. His face ached with the force of it. "I love you," he said, without even realising what the words would be before they passed his lips.

For a long moment, Hannibal was absolutely, preternaturally still. Inhaling and exhaling once, quite deliberately, he lifted a hand to cup Will's cheek and traced the edge of his thumbnail over Will's lips. "Remarkable boy. I could never deny you." He kissed Will again, achingly slow and sweet.

When the kiss ended, Will swayed toward him, licking his lips, unwilling to part just yet. Hannibal stopped him with a finger to his lips. "I, like you, must keep up appearances. If I

were to cancel my appointments unexpectedly, it might draw undue attention."

"Rest, and drink plenty of water. Tonight you will have your wish," Hannibal promised. Caught in his throat, Will's heart beat a wild, erratic tempo. Certainly Hannibal must have heard it. He nodded his agreement, not trusting his voice to speak. Hannibal rewarded him with another brief kiss, smile filled with promise, then left him there, slumped against the table.

Time seemed to trickle to a near stop, passing interminably over the course of the day. Will tried to sleep as Hannibal had ordered, but though he was worn ragged from his travelling, he was far too restive. He paced Hannibal's study for a few hours, plucking books down from the shelves at random and reading them until he grew impatient and began to pace again.

By late afternoon he had a pile of twelve or so on the stand by what he'd begun to think of as his armchair. He flung himself down dramatically, legs draped over the arm of the chair and stared absently at the flickering fire. A flush that had nothing to do at all with the temperature of the room rose in his cheeks. The memory of Hannibal on his knees only the night before last was diverting, but equally frustrating.

It was just after seven in the evening, when Will was ready to say to hell with keeping up appearances and go in search of Hannibal that the door opened, and there stood the man himself. *Not man* Will reminded himself. *And soon neither will you be*.

The basement chamber was comfortably warm when they stepped inside and Hannibal closed and barred the door behind them. A fire had been built, roaring cheerfully in the hearth, and was the only light at all in the room. The tub was filled near to the brim with water, steam rising from the surface.

Hannibal crowded him against the edge of the bed, never quite touching. His countenance was as strange and unreadable as the vampire's had been in his dreams. Shadows accentuated the sharp lines and angular planes of Hannibal's face, the light played tricks on Will's eyes, so that it was not Hannibal's beloved features before him, but the creature that lurked within.

Only now, instead of fear or disgust or nausea, Will felt peace. He saw deep within Hannibal's soul and found his own reflection staring back at him. Hannibal's eyes were black and bottomless, searching Will's. "Do you trust me?"

Will's answer required no thought; it came at once. "Yes."

"Will you obey me, unquestioningly, in this ceremony we are about to undertake?"

"Yes." It was little more than the shape of word on his breath, now to be among his very last.

No sooner was it past his lips than Hannibal set upon him, tearing the clothing from his frame. He left Will's jacket and shirt in a pile of tatters on the floor and pushed him back on the bed. The fastenings of his trousers split under the force of Hannibal's hands and he jerked them and his shorts down.

It was far more violent than Will expected, sparking mingled excitement and apprehension. He'd meant what he'd said; he trusted Hannibal--*with his life*--but he could not control his body's response. It seemed the fear only enhanced his arousal, making his pulse skip erratically at the rough handling. His cock jutted towards his stomach, foreskin angry red, leaping in excitement when Hannibal began to undress himself.

Will started to heft himself higher on the bed but Hannibal's hand clamped down on his thigh. "Stay."

Now naked, he took the lubricant from the nightstand and came to stand between Will's legs. With two fingers, he pushed the oil into Will's opening. The glide wasn't as smooth as had been before and his fingers were burning cold. Will hissed in discomfort, but forced himself to remain still. Hannibal's treatment was more perfunctory with an edge of pain. He withdrew and slicked more of the lubricant along his erection.

In this position, dangling half from the bed, Will was at the perfect height for Hannibal to enter him with ease. He settled in between Will's thighs and pushed the head of his cock against Will's opening. It circled the ring of muscle, smearing lubricant and the liquid leaking copiously from his prick. Then he surged forward, pushing inside, eyes locked onto Will's.

At first, there was too much resistance, but Hannibal kept going and Will's body had no choice but to give. That pervasive cold and the lasting ache made him gasp out in pain, and then again from the wash of sensory input. Too much to fully process, pain and pleasure alike, but more than either of those, the sensation of being filled up to the bursting point, tighter for not having been stretched, and Will thought it was a tradeoff worth making, the razor edge of discomfort, if it felt like *this*.

Hannibal grunted and shoved forward that final spare inch and was fully sheathed within him. He did not give Will a moment's pause to adjust or recover, but began to move at once, driving thrusts that reduced Will to desperate cries. They echoed against the stone walls of the room, along with the lewd smack of skin on skin, the wet sound of Will's body sucking Hannibal back inside with each jagged pulse of his hips.

Unable to tear his gaze from Hannibal's, Will was lost in the ebb and swell of all the emotion he saw there. Where before he'd never quite understood what thoughts lurked within Hannibal's well ordered mind, now it was all he knew. There was no questioning the obsessive, possessive love. The intensity of it would have been alarming and horrible if Will himself did not feel it to the same extent.

Will reached for him, longing to twine his arms around Hannibal's neck and pull him in for a kiss. His mouth tingled for want of it, and he licked his lips. But Hannibal caught him by the wrists and slammed them back against the mattress. He leaned in closer, changing the angle of his thrusts, and Will writhed at the sudden stimulation to that sweet spot inside.

"Much of how our kind came into being is shrouded in mystery. It seems as though each clan has their own origin myth. But--" Hannibal snapped his teeth at Will's mouth, snagging his bottom lip. Heat and blood blossomed on Will's tongue. "One thing in common is the sacrifice--the subject's debasement--though it needn't be willing, as it is in your case."

Will made a panting noise of assent, though there could be no uncertainty on Hannibal's part about his enjoyment of this act. The way his knees had lifted to clamp around Hannibal's hips, his legs cradling Hannibal, heels digging into the curve of his ass and pulling him in deeper, harder.

"It isn't always performed--only when the creator has a particular taste for such things, or to ensure a successful transformation and powerful progeny. I have no taste for it," Hannibal assured him. "But you will be strong. As strong as myself, in time." He slammed in hard, forcing a sob from Will's throat.

"Hann--*oh fuck*--Hannibal, please."

Will's hands clenched helplessly in the air, longing for the feel of Hannibal's skin beneath his palms, but though he strained against the hold Hannibal had on his wrists. Even if he were to put his entire strength behind it, he would be no match for Hannibal.

Hannibal ducked his head to sniff the curve of Will's throat, before licking over the healing wounds. "You are the first I've ever made in this way, and the only." Then his teeth were against Will's skin.

When Hannibal finally bit down, it was deeply, shockingly painful. After the almost tender bites that had come before, Will couldn't have anticipated this. It felt as though his whole throat had been ripped out, blood spilling down his neck and over his chest, faster than Hannibal could drink it.

Hannibal growled, sucking hungrily from the wound he'd made even as he continued to fuck into Will with those same shattering thrusts. Over the rushing in his ears, Will could hear the wet sounds of his own breathy gasps and the sickly suction of Hannibal's mouth sealed to his skin.

The pleasure was a distant, forgotten thing, but so too was the pain. Now Will only felt cold, spreading over his skin like falling snow--he could see it sparkling in the air around them, even as the room grew dimmer and dimmer. His legs fell loose from around Hannibal to dangle over the edge of the bed. His hands went slack, too weak to strain against Hannibal's hold any longer. Blood continued to pour from his wound. It was shockingly hot against his bare skin.

But even through the panicky fear that gripped him in the wake of these sensations, Hannibal's words settled comfortingly in Will's chest. The spoken confirmation that he was special. That this gift Hannibal was giving him was one he'd never share with any other, not even Abigail when the time came.

"It's dark." His mouth barely moved with the words, and his eyes fluttered shut, though he fought to keep them open.

With a final, jarring snap of his hips, Hannibal found his release, buried deep within him. Will's body moved with the force of it--he was still aware of it, but it no longer seemed important. Everything seemed to sway in time to a distant drumbeat that grew increasingly slower, lulling Will ever deeper below the surface of that cool lake. He was moving, being

carried, but he couldn't say if it were truly happening or if it was only in his mind, and then he was submerged in delicious liquid warmth.

"Open," Hannibal called to him, nudging at his lips.

Will's head lolled drunkenly on his neck against the wooden rim of the tub. A sharp pain shot through his head and something wet covered his mouth. "Will." Hannibal's voice was gently coaxing. "Do as I say."

Obediently, Will parted his lips. The wetness flowed between them, dripping into his mouth, onto his tongue. He could not discern a particular taste, but as it gathered on the back of his tongue and his throat worked to swallow that first mouthful, an incredible hunger overtook him. He lapped at the source, drawing more into his mouth, and with each swipe of his tongue, he became aware of the saltiness of his Hannibal's flesh, and the sweetness of his blood, the underlying metallic bite.

And then licking was not enough. Will flailed in the water, surprised when his arms obeyed him, rising up to grab Hannibal's wrist and haul him closer. His mouth opened wide against the skin, sucking with as much force as he could muster, and still it wasn't enough.

Will was aware of other things, now--the stinging heat of the water, the throbbing pain in his throat, and Hannibal's fingers rubbing his scalp consolingly. Though still his eyes would not open, or if they would, they were unseeing. He groaned in frustration against Hannibal's skin, thirst unslaked.

"Hush, my love," Hannibal murmured, lips against Will's forehead. He pulled his arm free effortlessly, despite Will's wounded noise of protest, and then, cupping the back of his neck, led Will into the curve of his throat. And oh, yes, *this* was what Will needed. Here Hannibal's blood gushed freely into his mouth, thick and heady.

Hannibal's fingers carded through his hair, soothing and encouraging, until at last Will had had his fill. Then, almost at once he was gripped with lancing pain in his gut. The sound of his own screams was the last thing he knew, before his death.

*

So many years had passed since the last time Will had slept peacefully, he could not recall what it meant to wake feeling so entirely well-rested. It was perhaps the most startling realisation he had, when his consciousness first returned. More than the heaviness throughout his body, or the eerie stillness of his chest, stirring neither with respiration or the working of his heart.

A smile tugged at his lips, and Hannibal's blood-warmed fingers traced the shape. Now Will understood what he'd meant, about his perception of temperature. He knew that his own skin was quite cold, but it didn't register in the way it once had--there was no prickling unpleasant sensation, no gooseflesh rising in response, but he registered the sensation all the same.

"Why are you smiling?"

Will smiled wider at the sound of his voice. The deeper timbre, resonating between them. “I think I finally understand the appeal of sleeping like the dead,” he murmured. What an odd sensation, trying to speak without air in his lungs. He drew an unnecessary breath and tried again. “Your voice--it’s like music.”

“It gets better,” Hannibal said, lips to Will’s ear as he spoke. “Open your eyes.”

The bed was blanketed in darkness, the thick curtains closed on all sides. All the same, the light from the fireplace found it’s way through. It wouldn’t have been enough to see by before. Now Will could see himself clearly--freshly bathed, his body whole, no speck of blood on him. The light glinted on the polish of the headboard and bed posts, sparking on the jewel of Hannibal’s ring, and catching in his eyes.

Eyes that now seemed to hold whole universes--delicate fibres, branching smaller and smaller. Deep mahogany and warm chocolate and bright crimson and a thousand other shades he had no name for, woven together in spiralling fractals.

“Will.” Hannibal’s fingers pressed hard enough to hurt against the curve of his cheekbone, and Will blinked and came back to himself.

“It can be difficult to control at first, and much more light than this will cause you discomfort. It will take some time for your senses to adapt.”

Will considered this, focussing on the sounds he could now hear--Abigail singing softly and the floorboards creaking, two floors above; a dog barking; water running somewhere nearby. The sheets smooth against his back, and Hannibal’s very fingerprints, whirling and looping, dragging over his face. The fragrance of soap and rosemary water on his own skin, and from the room the scent of mold and earth, semen and blood, rot and waste.

“Let me taste you,” he said, and didn’t wait for an answer, lunging for Hannibal and pushing him flat against the bed. Hannibal went willingly, smiling softly up at him as Will climbed atop him.

There was no mark on Hannibal’s throat from before, though the skin was pink when Will touched it, and softer than the rest, slightly warmer. He bent to lick at the spot. Even as he wondered how to make his fangs come out, there was a shifting in his gums--like his teeth were loose--and that now familiar sound. He groaned in relief and bit down gingerly.

The skin split so easily and Hannibal arched beneath him, moaning his name. His hands came up to rest against Will’s ribcage, and Will was profoundly aware of how still it was. He swallowed the first hot mouthful and was lost in the flavour--

How had he perceived it as sweet before? It was smokey and burned pleasantly on the way down his throat, making his mouth tingle. But more than that, it had character. Will could taste the centuries on him and that tar black darkness bubbling under his skin. It was both cloying and acrid, and all too addictive.

Will drank deeply from him, and he could feel effect it had on his body. A quickening warmth spreading through his veins. A strange, sluggishness in his chest where his heart used

to beat. His cock throbbing hard and heavy between his thighs. Energy humming along every nerve ending. How lovely and strange that now in death he'd never felt more alive.

Will needed to taste *all* of him. He sunk down the long, solid line of Hannibal's chest to his prick jutting hard between them, rolled back his foreskin, and dragged his tongue over the head, and then he was lost in that, too. Sucking and licking hungrily, taking him deeper, stopping up his throat, only he didn't need to breathe any longer.

It was exhilarating, and he was rewarded with the low, melodic moans from Hannibal's mouth, every pulse of Hannibal's cock, all briney musk and alkaline leaking on his tongue. He redoubled his efforts, to hear his name again, like a song from Hannibal's lips.

Hannibal pulled at his hair. "Come here," he said, and when Will lifted his head, presented him with the bottle of oil. Will's prick jerked with excitement and he took it, spilling it over the sheets and Hannibal's thighs in his haste. Hannibal's body was tight, but he opened as easily for Will's fingers as his skin had for his fangs, welcoming him.

As Will spread him open, Hannibal reached for Will's other hand and pulled his wrist to his mouth. The sensation of this bite was different now, all icy-hot pleasure, and it sparked the hunger in Will's chest. He bent his head to the join of Hannibal's thigh and drank from him as his fingers prodded deeper. The blood was thinner, the flavour less intense, but Will could almost *feel* his own blood cycling through Hannibal's veins and back into him again.

"That's enough," Hannibal said, mouth stained red. "Take me now."

"Yes," Will gasped, no breath behind it to voice the word. He gulped a lungful of air and said it again, straining up to meet Hannibal's mouth in a kiss. Hannibal's fingers curled into the meat of his ass, pulling him in. Blindly, Will slicked his hand over his cock and guided himself into that narrow passage.

"Oh, oh, Hannibal," he managed, eyes squeezed shut tight. "I'm not--I can't--" He shuddered and sank in deeper, and Hannibal was so *tight*. He clenched around Will's cock when they finally rested flush together. "It's too much, I can't last."

Hannibal wrapped a hand around his own cock, jerking fast. His eyes were aflame with a thousand shades of red when Will looked into them, and Will felt like he was catching fire under that gaze. "Then spend yourself, darling," he said. "Let me feel you."

Their lips met in an ardent kiss, soft susurrations of pleasure passing from their joined mouths. Will sucked Hannibal's tongue between his lips, tasting of Hannibal's arousal and both their blood. He had no control over the workings of his body, as rough as Hannibal had been with him now in his inexpert, desperate fucking. Driving over and over again into that welcoming sheath, he did as Hannibal said and spent himself deep within. Hannibal followed him closely, hot and wet against his stomach.

Yet still Will was not satisfied. Within a few moments of tender, quieting kisses, his passion was reignited, his cock as hard and insistent as ever. He began to move again, rocking his hips, and Hannibal allowed it for a moment before he broke off their kiss. They moved as

one, almost as if Will understood his intentions. He pulled out long enough for Hannibal to roll onto his stomach and rise up on all fours, then pushed back inside.

Hannibal let out a long, low moan as Will fucked into him. His body spasmed with the force of his pleasure, and Will tried to recreate the same exact angle as he drew back and thrust in again. “Yes,” Hannibal hissed and hung his head with a faint chuckle. “What a quick learner you are.”

Will draped close over his back, sought out Hannibal’s prick and played with the slick foreskin and sensitive head as he thrust out and in again, until Hannibal was hard in his palm, too. His lips seeking through the silky fall of his hair until he found skin, sweat-damp and warm. Then he sank in his fangs and was overwhelmed all over again by the dizzying spiral of sensation. Hannibal’s skin and his scent, his body pulling Will’s pleasure from him. He was insensible with it, when found his release.

It was not quite the same as losing consciousness--he was still aware of his body as Hannibal laid him out flat on his back and climbed atop him, speared himself open on Will’s still rampant cock. “Oh, please,” he cried. “I don’t know how much more I can give.”

Hannibal chuckled again, a warming sound, and leaned near with his hands braced against Will’s shoulders. The ends of his hair tickled most delightfully over Will’s chest. When Will opened his eyes, it was to a wicked smile twisting Hannibal’s lips as he rode Will’s cock. What a sight he was, all the lithe muscles of his body flexing with each roll of his hips, like a dance.

“You’ll give as much as I take,” he said, and kissed Will, blood-slick and hot. “And I will take all that you give.”

With a sigh, he tucked his face in Will’s neck and bit him there, drinking shallowly, then pressing a kiss to the wound Will felt it close even as Hannibal licked up the remaining blood. “You won’t always be so insatiable. Enjoy it for now.”

Will reached for him, wrapping his arms around him and holding him close and tight. He rocked upwards to meet Hannibal’s grinding hips. In the end, he nearly lost count of how many times he spent himself; it all blurred together after a while.

Hannibal drove him to that brink again and again, with his body, and then his mouth, and then with his cock, fucking him until he cried, sore and damp, and finally having his fill. They were both cold to the touch by then, and Hannibal brought down fresh water, heated at the stove, for them to bathe in.

After, he lay in Hannibal’s arms, and drank from him again, hungry and so very tired, until Hannibal gently disengaged himself, and said, “Sleep. I’ll bring you something for that hunger when you wake.” He bundled them under the warm furs, and the room was dark and cosy. So, Will did as he was told, and surrendered again to that boundless, empty, dreamless slumber.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

last chapter! there will be an epilogue within the next few days :)

The first time he woke, Will was senseless with hunger. It was a ravenous, gnawing pit in his gut, eating him from the inside out. A desperate thirst that felt as though his throat would split open without something soon to drink. Hannibal was at his side within moments, with fresh, hot blood. Will didn't ask the source of it, and Hannibal didn't provide that information.

With each meal he felt his strength grow. He would drink greedily from the cup, and then greedily from Hannibal. Of his blood and of his body, that insatiable lust fading bit by bit into something more manageable.

Every time Hannibal opened the door, even overwhelmed by hunger, Will feared what he might see. When Hannibal had promised him food upon waking, he wasn't so foolish as to think he meant the elaborate dinners Hannibal had prepared for him before, but neither had he expected fresh blood in goblets from some unknown donor.

But when Hannibal finally brought him live prey, it was a buck he led through the door. The creature was calm, walking towards Will, it's hooves muffled by the carpets underfoot. Will, unable to help himself, lurched forward. His hands grasped at the antlers, angling back the buck's head, and he sunk to his knees.

In that moment, he couldn't process all the sensations. The scent of the buck, or the texture of its pelt, how it felt when he bit down, or even the fact that the buck held still for him as he did so.

Then the blood spilled over his tongue, hot and alive, and entirely unlike drinking from Hannibal or the goblet. Thicker, spicy and earthy rather than sweet. Within the first few mouthfuls, Will could feel his body responding. The blood was quickening in him, returning reason and sensation. His body warmed all over in slow, rippling wave. It pulsed through him, sluggishly at first, then stronger with each long draw of blood down his throat.

Will moaned and drank faster and deeper. The buck's breathing grew laboured, and still it remained, placid and unmoving. Will's fingers flexed, the antlers smooth on the surface. He dragged them along to the sharp tips, down to curl in the knobby bones where they joined the skull, rubbing the fur soothingly.

Under his palm, it's heart beat slower and slower, even as Will grew strong, until Hannibal's hand rested on his shoulder, and Will understood to stop. He drew back, lifting his arm to

wipe away the mess, but Hannibal caught his wrist. He went down on his knees at Will's side, licking up the trickle of blood down his chin.

Will kept one hand on the buck, even as Hannibal kissed the blood from his mouth. It teetered and Will broke away from Hannibal to help the creature lower itself to the ground. "It's going to die, isn't it? I took too much?"

Hannibal reached out to pet the front flank of the buck. "You can rest assured that it did not suffer. It is no different from killing an animal for it's meat. And those parts we can't use, we can share. There are patients of mine who will be thankful for the extra food and hide in winter time."

"A philanthropic murderer," Will hummed in amusement, but there was an uneasy twist in his gut. He gave Hannibal an appraising look. "I thought you would--I thought you would bring a person."

Now it was Hannibal's turn to appraise him, gaze piercing. He stroked a hand down Will's cheek and cupped his jaw. "That is a decision you must make for yourself, not one to be foisted upon you when you're out of your mind with hunger."

Will swallowed thickly. He forced himself to meet Hannibal's eyes when he spoke. "I think it might have been easier to accept, if you had."

"That may be so," Hannibal agreed. He turned the back of his hand against Will's skin, nudging back his hair, lifting it from his cheek and neck. "But if you are to survive, you must be strong. I won't coddle you, Will."

"How do you pick them?" Will asked. It was something he'd wondered for some time now, before he'd even realised the vampire was Hannibal. The strange collection of victims, from the lonely traveller, to the beautiful young girl in the stables, to the mother who'd killed her young.

"They die so that I may survive, it is as simple as that."

"If it were as simple as that, you could feed on animals," Will said.

Hannibal arched a brow, lips curving upwards ever so slightly. "To me, the vast majority of humanity are no different from this creature, but then you already knew that to be true." He settled himself more fully on the ground, still absently petting the dying buck. "There are times when I've drank the blood of animals, but there is rarely ever a time when a deserving human being isn't close at hand."

"And what makes them deserving, Hannibal?" Will needed to know. He could feel the siren call for blood beckoning him--not because of this new condition. There was no sense in pretending now, not after giving over to this, that he hadn't felt it even before. All those nightmares that he'd blamed on the minds of the killer's he'd caught, when deep down he'd known the truth.

The buck took one last breath and fell silent. It's ribcage lay unmoving beneath Will's hand.

“Whenever possible, I take those whose behaviour has been intolerably barbarous, but I will do whatever is necessary to survive. Whether I follow some strict code or kill indiscriminately has no bearing on how you choose your prey, dear Will.”

As Will considered this, Hannibal stood and bent to haul the deer over his shoulders. “It’s nearly sunset,” Hannibal told him, going to the door. “I’ll bring down fresh water for you to bathe, and if you’re feeling up to it, we can dine with Abigail tonight. She is eager to see you.”

The bath was delightfully hot, enough that his skin turned bright pink, and he knew that before his change, it would have made him hiss in pain and draw back. Now he sank happily into the water, letting the scent of rosemary and the gentle lapping sound lull him into a sort of waking sleep. His thoughts wandered and with them, his senses.

Hannibal’s implicit approval for Will to kill as he saw fit, human or beast was not a reassurance. It was nothing more than the illusion of choice, and they both knew it. As the buck’s borrowed blood flowed through him, granting him the creature’s strength, Will could feel the sum of its life. Simple, mostly impressionistic, but Will had felt the instinctual intelligence of the creature. How different would it be to drink from a living human being? The idea was tantalising.

No, Will had no real choice in the matter, but it wasn’t Hannibal who’d robbed him of it. Will’s own desires would lead him down that path, and Hannibal would have him openly acknowledge it. Then, it was only a matter of time before he went after human prey.

A spark of sweet anticipation ran through his nerves at the thought of hunting a human--maybe not by Hannibal’s standards, but something similar. Someone like the men and women he’d spent his adult life studying. Someone who didn’t deserve the life they had, and what more fitting punishment for their crimes than to take it from them in order to sustain his own. They who would rob others of their lives, dying to provide sustenance.

Will smiled to himself at this thought. Though it wasn’t the same as Hannibal’s motivation, he would appreciate it nonetheless.

After drying, he dressed in the clothing Hannibal provided him. Since his transformation, he’d been in the nude. The room was always pleasant temperate, and they spent most of their time in bed, anyway.

Now he could appreciate the way the fine material shifted against his skin. The cut was looser and more casual than he was accustomed to wearing outside the privacy of his own rooms, but it was made of finely textured fabric. Black trousers with a faint white pinstripe, the silk brocade jacket various dark shades of purple paisley print. They were sumptuous and comfortable, like a second skin.

As he made his way upstairs, the fragrant spices of Hannibal’s cooking drifted down to meet him, but where before they would have made his stomach growl in a hunger response, now they were merely nice in the way he appreciated any pleasant scent.

Abigail was at the stove in an emerald green wrapper, far more casual than was strictly appropriate. Will was a member of the household now, he supposed, behind the veil. It hadn't occurred to him until that moment. The thought suffused him with happiness, particularly when the door creaked as he closed it, and Abigail spun around, face brightening when she saw him.

"Will!" she exclaimed, and came to him, arms tossed around his neck. He was still growing used to this sort of brazen display of affection, but carefully closed her in his embrace, arms around her waist.

Holding her, Will was aware for the first time of the delicacy of the human body. How fragile Abigail, how little force it would take to crush her. To squeeze the air from her lungs, snap her bones like twigs, to pierce the paper-fine skin over her pulse. He could smell the blood in her veins, far more complicated than that of the buck and his mouth watered for a taste of it.

Gasping out of habit rather than necessity, Will released her, and stumbled backward. Abigail watched him, a curious tilt to her smile, one brow arched. He had the distinct impression she was laughing at him. "You don't need to be afraid," she said.

"Afraid?" Will echoed, disbelief laced through the word, as if to say *me?*

Abigail took a step towards him, and when he didn't shy away, another. "You're not going to hurt me."

"How can you be so certain?" Will wondered, even as his gaze was caught by the feathering blue veins along her jaw and down her throat. They'd never been so noticeable before, but now they were all he could see. He tore his eyes away, staring fixedly at the floor instead.

"Because." Abigail reached out and took his hand in hers. "Hannibal would never have chosen you if you would. He's a good judge of character."

Will laughed half-heartedly at that. Possessing of the sort of character of which a vampire would approve. Somehow he wasn't sure that necessarily translated into someone who was safe to be around. But her words served their purpose. Will knew he could control himself. He wasn't even hungry at the moment, and even if he were, there were others out there, far more deserving of his appetite.

Taking a step closer, into the curve of Will's side, Abigail shared a conspiratorial look with him. "What is it like?" she asked in barely more than a whisper.

It had been nearly a week now, since Hannibal drained him to the point of death. During that time of transition, he'd felt much like a newborn child, figuring out the rules of the world.

Control over his senses grew with every passing day, but there were still times when he could hear the distant rumble of voices from the town, or smell the earth beyond the foundation of the house and the creatures that inhabited it, the silt of the river that ran through the forest, and the waste of the townspeople.

This evening the lights dimly flickered, set low for his benefit, and still if he looked at them directly, they burnt his eyes. Now he understood why Hannibal was keeping him securely locked up during the daytime.

Abigail watched him, and Will wondered how much of what he felt she could read in his face. Will considered his answer, giving her hand a gentle squeeze before disentangling himself. The window was cracked open to the cold night air for the heat of the kitchen to escape.

Will looked out at the distant line of trees where he could see the needles of the pine trees swaying in the breeze, the brown hare in the dense undergrowth, the moonlight catching on the curl of bark from the silver birch. A million other details he'd never have seen with his old eyes, now beautiful and hypnotic enough to steal his attention and keep it for hours, perhaps days on end.

And these weren't even the sort of things that held any particular interest for him. How he now dreamed of endless afternoons on the water. Appreciating the skip and hum of the insects playing light and shadow over the surface, the sound of the river on the stones, worn smooth with time, that crisp clean scent in all its complexity laid bare for him.

Of what it would be to look on the familiar, well-loved places of his youth. Walking the streets of New Orleans and drinking in the vibrant sights and sounds of the city come to life, the briny smell of the ocean and the spicy fragrance of cajun cuisine burning in the back of his throat.

What of joining Hannibal on the hunt. Seeing first hand and in great detail that terrifying strength and preternatural speed. The charm he exerted effortlessly to beguile their victims. How the fresh blood would look on his skin. Not black, as it appeared to humans, but glittering a thousand shades of red in the moonlight. The last of it licked clean from him, blending their victim's flavour with Hannibal's.

Abigail waited patiently, and at last, Will tried to put it in words that she could understand.

"Before I knew for certain of the vampire's existence, when Jack first told me the story of what he'd seen, I was horrified. But my first thought was not horror at the idea that such a creature might prey on the blood of innocent victims. My horror was at the idea of eternal life. I'm not a religious man; I'd always thought of life as finite, as death as the end of our travails. The concept of eternity was worse than frightening, it was unbearable."

"And now?" Abigail asked, voice soft, almost timid.

Will granted her a smile. They came easier now, less strained, more genuine. Upon seeing it, she returned it with her own, happiness painted hesitant across her face. "Now," Will said, and this time he went to her, taking her hand, assured of her safety with him.

"There's so much to experience, Abigail, I'm not even sure eternity is time enough for it all. But I'm eager to share it with Hannibal. And with you."

Abigail's smile warmed, and she hugged Will again, pressing into his chest. He was aware of the heat of her, rising from her skin like something alive. A worn blanket, unassumingly cosy and comfortable. Was that how he had felt against Hannibal? Did Hannibal regret giving it up so quickly?

A brief stirring of remorse swept through Will, at his own insistence on haste in this. It was quelled when Hannibal came in the door from the outside and saw them together. There was no regret in his expression, only enduring fondness and approbation. An expression reserved for family.

Doubtless others would view their unconventional situation as anything approaching family. Who would seek it out from the man who'd left a broken home and never looked back, who'd alienated everyone in his life and closed himself off to the possibility? The girl whose own father had tried to kill her, leaving her broken in his wake? The monster, centuries gone from his own time and place in the world, who killed without conscious?

You were as much an orphan as I, in many ways, Hannibal had said to him. Each of them was, in their own right.

Hannibal laid a hand on Abigail's back and a brief kiss on the crown of her head. His lips dragged across Will's forehead as he passed them by to check on dinner. There was a fluttering in his chest, where his heart used to beat. Others be damned, *this* was the only family he'd ever wanted, presented for him on a silver platter, and he'd seize it gladly. Greedily.

"Finish setting the table, Abigail," Hannibal said, off-hand, from his place by the stove. "Will, could you go select a bottle of wine?"

How normal, how utterly charmingly mundane. The three of them sitting together over a meal. Abigail's shy smile as she glanced at them sidelong from under her lashes. Hannibal laying his hand over Will's as they ate, fingers laced together in plain view on the table top. Asking after Abigail's lessons, testing her French. "You'll have to learn these things, for your travels."

And after, retiring to the study. Will had only grazed on dinner. It was strange to eat without hunger, but the flavours were lovely. He was more interested in the wine, and the now familiar flavour of blood laced within, and the rich pudding for dessert, with that same heady tang. That, more than the alcohol gave him the sense of being intoxicated.

So much so that when Abigail had finished singing and pressed Will to take his turn, he obliged her. It seemed selfish and insincere not to, when he was thinking in terms of family Anyway, it was worth Abigail's peals of surprised laughter and Hannibal, looking at him thoroughly enchanted.

When Abigail finally went off to bed, Hannibal glanced across the space between them, where the fire crackled cheerily in the hearth, and extended a hand. Will rose and came close, hand in Hannibal's palm, let himself be drawn near.

After a moment, he realised Hannibal's intention, and hitched up his knee, insinuating it into the space between Hannibal's thigh and the chair arm. He leaned in, their mouths not quite meeting, Hannibal's hand braced on his back for balance as Will climbed the rest of the way into his lap.

Hannibal flicked open the button of Will's jacket, sliding beneath to press against the thin fabric of his shirt, skin bleeding cold against Will's. "Haven't you eaten?" Will asked, ducking his head to pluck kisses down Hannibal's neck.

"The wine doesn't warm us in the same way, even less than drinking from me," Hannibal explained.

Will hummed indication of understanding, fingers working open the button at the collar of Hannibal's shirt, and the next, and the next, until he could rest his warm hand against the crisp hair of Hannibal's chest, cool under his touch. "So you didn't hunt for yourself."

"When I am not attempting to maintain appearances for handsome strangers with wandering hands," Hannibal said, even as he pulled Will's shirt free from his trousers, "I do not need to feed very often, and certainly not as frequently as you'll need to, at first. A few times a year. I could manage once or twice, if necessary."

Will pulled back enough to catch his gaze. "You've left behind far more bodies than that," he said.

Hannibal's expression bordered on cynical. "Surely you don't think I kill only out of necessity? You, who have seen beyond this human skin?"

"No," Will agreed.

If Hannibal expected that to dissuade him in some way, he would be mistaken. Will drew forth his fangs and used scraped them across Hannibal's bottom lip, just enough to bring two thin lines of blood to the surface. It was slow in beading, thick, and tasted richer on Will's tongue. He licked it away, and then past Hannibal's lips, kissing him soundly before parting.

"No, I think you enjoyed it far before you were ever changed."

"And you, Will?" Hannibal found bare skin, palms soothing up his sides and around his back, along the notches of his ribcage.

Will nodded, caught his mouth in a longer kiss. "I did, too," he said. "Before you changed me. Before I ever met you."

"I know." Hannibal brought one hand up to brush Will's curls out of his face. "But it is gratifying to hear you say so."

"What would it serve either of us for me to deny it?" Will asked. "I chose you. To be with you, to *hunt* alongside you."

Hannibal growled, a satisfied noise that shot arousal through Will like a spark. "And you will," he promised, and sealed it with a kiss.

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

> This is a really short little thing to set up for the fics that will follow in this series, and I'm so, so sorry it took so long to post this. I actually had it finished when I posted the 10th chapter and just needed to edit it, and then I absolutely forgot! I thought I'd already posted it, and only noticed yesterday that I hadn't *facepalm*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After two weeks, Will's hearing was the first of his senses to come under his control. He could send it out deep into the woods, miles in the distance, or call it close, blocking out the sounds from beyond his basement room.

Touch seemed as if it would come next, but every time he thought it was contained, he'd come distracted by the feel of velvet against his skin, or Hannibal's tongue on his body, and lose himself in that sensation. For the most part he could rein it in, but he didn't feel any particular desire to do so.

Unlike the hearing where until he gained control, he caught snatches of distant conversation he didn't care to hear, or strange, high-pitched sounds that pierced his skull, or his sense of smell, where the stench of waste and decay smothered all else, touch was a constant delight.

Three weeks in, he could at least focus on the pleasant scents with which Hannibal filled the room. The delicate floral arrangements, the fragrant herbs and spices of the teas he brought permeating the air.

Vision, he felt intrinsically, would be more difficult to master. Hannibal had said it would be some time before his body and eyes could withstand even the dullest rays of sunlight, and will quickly learned that to be true. Simply coming out into the main basement room during the daytime, with the cellar door open, the quality of light was different. It tingled on his exposed skin and he'd been forced to close his eyes, finding his way back into the room by touch.

Which is why by daytime he would lie within his curtained bed, reading books from Hannibal's library, and practicing his control over his hearing. He'd listen in on Hannibal's appointments with his patients, and Abigail and her tutor in their lessons.

It was in the early afternoon that an unexpected knock came on the door, calling Will's attention from the words on the page before him. Abigail's heeled boots on the floor and her voice murmuring a greeting in her slowly improving Russian. If Will's heart was still beating, it would have stopped at the voice that answered her.

Jack's familiar, low rumbling voice, as clear as if Will stood next to him, fumbling along with an explanation in Russian, until they both made the switch to English.

"Doctor Crawford," Hannibal greeted, and there was a strange lurching sensation in Will's chest, like his heart would be racing out of control if it could. "Please, come in--I heard a great deal about your work from Professor Graham during his time in town."

Will could just imagine the two of them sizing each other up. Jack's inherent suspicion of everyone and everything, compounded by the knowledge that Hannibal was among the last to see Will before his disappearance. Hannibal's face in a carefully applied expression of bemusement and innocent curiosity, even as he assessed the threat Jack posed.

"Actually," Jack said, their footsteps trailing into the parlour, "Professor Graham is why I'm here. Oh, thank you."

If Will closed his eyes and breathed deeply, he could catch the scent of freshly brewed coffee and beneath that, Hannibal's favourite additive. He made an abortive movement towards the door in outraged protest on Jack's behalf, but there was nothing to be done. He couldn't go upstairs--couldn't even open the door at this point in the day, with the light still streaming golden through the windows. Besides which, if Jack saw him, Hannibal wouldn't allow him to leave with his life.

"Yes, Will was disappointed to leave without having completed his work here," Hannibal said. "But the injuries he suffered were quite serious. I have no doubt he'll recover completely, but I am quite glad he took my advice to return home."

Jack inhaled, and Will could hear the calculation in his voice when spoke. "Well, you see, that's the thing. Will never arrived home."

There was a brief silence, Hannibal's feigned shock. "I'm sorry--he's not--did he stay on in Warsaw?"

"No. In fact, Professor Graham never made it to Warsaw, as far as anyone can tell."

"As far as anyone can tell?" Hannibal echoed.

"Doctor Lecter…" Jack fell silent for a moment, and Will's unease grew with each passing second. "Will wrote that you were assisting him in his investigation."

"It's not everyday a genuine vampire hunter comes to your door, asking for your help." Hannibal chuckled, and Jack responded in kind, indulgent humour in his voice.

"No, I don't suppose they do. It seemed that until the attack on his life by Mister Tier, Will felt he was closing in on the creature's trail. Then, quite abruptly, he decided to pack up and head home, and he disappears along the way. You understand how I might draw a connection between the two," Jack said.

Hannibal hummed. "I would not say that his decision to return home was abrupt. He did not make it lightly--I know it weighed heavy on his mind, the idea of leaving his work

unfinished. Is it at all possible he fell ill during his journey? Perhaps he merely sought out medical care along the way."

"You got to know Will quite well, during his time here." It was neither statement nor question, hovering somewhere in between, almost accusatory.

"I suppose, as well as anyone can know someone like Will," Hannibal said, and Will could tell that was as much for his benefit as Jack's. He was too anxious to spare a moment's amusement just now.

Jack laughed outright at that, but it was edged in grief. "He certainly could be...brusque."

"Forgive me, Doctor Crawford, but don't you feel it's a bit premature to speak of Will in the past tense."

There was nothing wrong with saying it, but Will knew it would only further rouse Jack's suspicion. "You're right," Jack said. "Forgive me. I've been under a great deal of stress as of late."

"Will mentioned…" A hesitation. "Your wife's illness? I trust she has recovered?"

Will clenched his fists in the bedsheets and gritted his teeth, unreasonably angry. Hannibal knew that Bella was never going to recover from her illness; he was just twisting the knife of Jack's agony.

"Her health has improved, for the time being," Jack said. "Enough to allow me to make this trip. Whatever happened to Will, I owe it to him to bring this vampire to justice."

"Of course," Hannibal agreed. Rising to his feet with assured grace, leading Jack into the study. "Come with me, Doctor Crawford; I'll help you find your vampire."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for sticking with me guys. I know it's been pretty quiet on the fic front with me, but I promise there's actually quite a lot going on. I'm working on some collaborations I'm very excited to share once they're a bit further along, as well as a couple other WIPs and short fics that I plan on posting, but in general, summer is a slow time for writing with all the real life stuff I have going on. But I'm in the Hannibal fandom to stay, and I'm so excited by what I'm writing, just be patient with me!

Works inspired by this one

Illustration for The God of Appetite by TheSeaVoices

食欲之神 by HayKer, lzskwzl

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